DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 281 694 RC 016 205

AUTHOR	Monk, David H.; Haller, Emil J.
TITLE	Organizational Alternatives for Small Rural Schools. Final Report to the Legislature of the State of New York.
INSTITUTION	State Univ. of New York, Ithaca. Coll. of Agriculture and Life Sciences at Cornell Univ.
SPONS AGENCY	New York State Legislature, Albany.
PUB DATE	Dec 86
NOTE	130p.
PUB TYPE	Reports - Research/Technical (143)
EDRS PRICE	MF01/PC06 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS	Case Studies; *Consolidated Schools; Educational Policy; Educational Responsibility; Educational Technology; Elementary Secondary Education; Rural Education; *Rural Schools; School District Autonomy; *School District Reorganization; School District Size; School Surveys; Shared Resources and Services; *Small Schools; State Aid; *State School District Relationship
IDENTIFIERS	*New York; *Organizational Alternatives

ABSTRACT

This report provides an overview of a two-year study which analyzed reorganization/consolidation of small rural school districts, studied alternatives of inter-district resource sharing and new instructional technologies, and developed recommendations for changes in state laws/procedures. Researchers studied 11 small rural school districts in New York State, conducted interviews, studied community histories, analyzed statewide data, and reviewed research literature. Four conclusions emerged: (1) substantial problems existing in small rural school districts significantly disadvantage students, yet small districts provide important educational advantages to pupils and communities; (2) New York promotes district reorganization as the preferred solution to small rural school problems; (3) district reorganization has serious deficiencies and the state should not artificially encourage reorganization with financial incentives; and (4) neither resource sharing nor new technologies will solve problems related to school size. The report recommends 3 broad changes in state policy and 12 specific changes in state procedures/laws; the 3 broad changes are: (1) unbiased consideration of reorganization, (2) provision of additional organizational alternatives, and (3) state acceptance of financial responsibility for costs of expanding educational opportunities in small rural schools. Chapters discuss history of schooling in New York State, describe methodologies and towns/schools studied, examine politics/experiences of district reorganization, and explore resource sharing and innnovative technologies. (LFL)

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Organizational Alternatives for Small Rural Schools

FINAL REPORT TO THE NEW YORK STATE LEGISLATURE

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RC016205

Organizational Alternatives for Small Rural Schools

Final Report to the Legislature of the State of New York

MAY 1987
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by

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December 1986

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Acknowledgments

This report is the product of many people's efforts and the contributions of several organizations. We are grateful to them all.

We are, of course, indebted to the Legislature of the State of New York. Its willingness to fund this research testifies to its continuing commitment to providing a quality education to rural youth.

We appreciate the comments and support of the New York State Education Department. Throughout the course of our work we have gained much from our contacts with various officials in that agency. We also appreciate their willingness to provide us with information drawn from their extensive, statewide data bases.

We are grateful to the Department of Education and the Office of Research of the College of Agriculture and Life Sciences at Cornell University. In part, our gratitude is for the considerable financial support, drawn from Hatch funds and other sources, that they have provided. Mostly, however, we are grateful for the milieu the Department and College have established, a milieu that values and nurtures research and that makes the doing of it intellectually absorbing. Without such an environment, this project would have been possible, but it would have been infinitely less interesting.

We benefited greatly from the counsel offered us by the members of the Rural Schools Program. The Rural Schools Program, representing over three-hundred small rural school districts around New York State, broadened our perspective on the problems faced by these institutions. In a similar way we profited from our contacts with the New York Council on Rural Education.

Early in the life of this project we asked a number of distinguished persons to serve as an advisory board to this project. What these persons had in common was their commitment to education and their willingness to advance a point of view. They gave us the benefit of their extensive experience with small rural schools, counseled us about the directions the research should take, and reacted to our conclusions and recommendations—sometimes with considerable acerbity. While we did not always follow their advice, we always profited from attending to it.

We were fortunate in having been able to assemble a highly competent staff for this project. In particular we wish to thank Jane Robertson for her careful administrative oversight of the entire effort. Jane and our graduate students spent many hours of their time travelling to distant sites and interviewing community residents, parents, educators, students and state officials. They prepared case studies for us, they researched specific issues at our request, and they wrote thoughtful papers about those issues. These graduate students were: Scott Bilow, Gary Canter, Pamela Ellis, Patrick Galvin, Stephen Jacobson, and Kate Woodward. We are especially grateful to Sidney Doan, whose resourcefulness continues to make this office an efficient, effective and pleasant place to work.

Finally, we want to express our thanks to the hundreds of persons we interviewed and surveyed in rural communities around the State. Wherever we went, residents, parents, school board members, administrators, teachers and students gave freely of their time and were unfailingly helpful. This research would not have been possible without their cooperation.

All of these persons and organizations contributed to this work. The views we express in it, however, are our own.

We have contributed equally to the writing of this report.

Notes

1. See the Appendix for a list of these individuals and the organizations they represent.

Executive Summary

BACKGROUND

We have carried out a two-year study of organizational alternatives for New York State's small rural school districts. In this document we describe that study and report our findings and recommendations to the Legislature. Here, in the Executive Summary, we briefly review our conclusions and the changes we suggest in the state's policy concerning those schools.

We have examined the belief that changing the organization of small rural school districts offers solutions to their problems. The change that has received the most attention in this State (and others) entails joining together separately organized school districts into single, larger, organizational entities. In New York State this change is known variously as consolidation, centralization, or annexation. More simply, it is termed school district reorganization.

Although we devoted a substantial part of this study to analyzing school district reorganization, we also studied alternatives to it. In particular, we examined whether voluntary inter-district sharing of resources and new instructional technologies could solve the problems created by small size.

In conducting this research we and our associates carried out eight in-depth case studies of eleven small rural school districts located throughout New York State. All of these districts have had significant experiences with reorganization or one of its alternatives. In each we spent a great deal of time interviewing students, teachers, administrators, school board members and residents. We talked with State officials and local politicians. We read the local papers and delved into community history. In short, we tried to understand the district and its problems. In addition to these case studies, we carried out statistical analyses of data collected from all school districts in New York, and we reviewed the research literature on several aspects of district reorganization and its alternatives.

This report is an overview of our findings, our conclusions, and our recommendations. Readers interested in more detailed accounts of the findings and conclusions should refer to the 14 background papers written as part of this research. Eight of these papers report the results of the case studies. Six technical papers deal with selected issues and are based on historical data, statistical analyses of curricular offerings, or literature reviews of educational technology and inter-district sharing. A description of each paper appears in Chapter 2.

CONCLUSIONS

In summary, we have reached four broad conclusions based on our case studies, our study of the historical record, our statistical analyses of statewide data and our reviews of the research literature. These are labelled A through D in the following text.

A. *Substantial problems exist in the small rural school districts in New York State, problems that significantly disadvantage the students who attend them. At the same time, these small districts provide important educational advantages to pupils and to the communities in which they are located.*

This conclusion will hardly come as a surprise to thoughtful educators or laymen in rural communities. Nevertheless, it is important to express it at the outset, because these districts have not been in the forefront of the State's attention in recent years. More importantly, it needs to be stated because there is a very strong tendency for people to see either strengths or weaknesses when they look at small rural schools, not both.

In regard to weaknesses, for example, some of these schools are characterized by very limited curricula; they present students with scheduling difficulties that even further restrict pupils' programs; they are experiencing a shortage of competent teachers in particular subjects; their teachers face heavy and nonspecialized teaching loads; their facilities and equipment are sometimes antiquated; and the educational aspirations—of both students and communities—tend to be low.

Yet these same schools have notable strengths. They are often focal points of community activity and pride; they are largely devoid of the corrosive disciplinary problems found in larger urban districts; their students are learning "the basics" at least as well as the average New York pupil, and in many instances substantially better than the average; and these schools provide far greater opportunities for students to develop their leadership potential and their non-academic skills than do their larger counterparts.

When we consider these districts' problems, the important point to recognize is that each school system evidences a unique constellation of particular adversities. Further, some problems appear in only the very smallest of school systems, those with enrollments below 400 in grades 9-12, and they become especially serious in systems with high schools that serve fewer than 100 students. Finally, we conclude that some of these districts' problems are almost certainly intractable; they are unlikely to yield to any conceivable action by the State.

B. *New York State has a longstanding policy of promoting district reorganization as the preferred solution to the problems of small rural schools.*

Reorganization is a process that has been used many times in New York State in order to create larger school districts. In recent years, however, that use has declined precipitously. Despite this decline, the State continues to promote reorganization as an effective means for solving the problems of small rural school districts.

The State's promotion of district reorganization has taken many forms, some overt, some subtle. Among the former, the very substantial financial incentives paid to reorganized school districts is surely the most telling. Among the latter, the acceptance of "feasibility studies" that are manifestly biased toward reorganization is equally revealing.

It is not that the State is exclusively preoccupied with school district reorganization as the solution to the problems of small rural schools. It does, for example, encourage districts to share programs and use interactive telecommunications as other ways to address their difficulties. It remains unwilling, however, to view these activities as substitutes for reorganization. Rather, it considers them devices that, at best, can complement its preferred long-run solution: the creation of larger school districts.

C. District reorganization, as a solution to the problems of small rural schools, has very serious deficiencies.

Our systematic discussion in Chapter 4 of reorganization's disadvantages is new to the debate in New York State about school district mergers. The past is characterized by glowing one-sided reports prepared by the State Education Department of reorganization's advantages and benefits. The State claims that reorganization improves programs and facilities and lowers tax rates. However, it is impossible for the State to know this. Are these the consequences of reorganization or of the additional operating and building aid paid to newly-merged districts?

Our research leads us to the firm conclusion that school district reorganization will not reliably solve the problems of New York State's small rural school districts. While there are benefits associated with increasing enrollment levels toward 100 in a high school graduating class, substantial fiscal and social costs attend doing so. On balance, we conclude that the benefits are not nearly so large or dependable relative to these costs as the advocates of reorganization suggest. We also conclude that in no case is the State well advised to artificially encourage reorganization through the use of financial incentives.

D. Organizational alternatives such as voluntary inter-district sharing and instructional technology have merit. Like reorganization, however, they also suffer from very serious deficiencies.

Two entirely different approaches to the problems engendered by small size are programs of voluntary inter-district sharing and of instructional technology. Advocates of the first approach suggest that if small rural school districts would voluntarily share their resources and programs, all would benefit. If, for example, two neighboring districts have too few pupils to offer calculus, they might be able to do so if they pooled their students and hired a part-time teacher. Advocates of the second approach point to computerized instruction or interactive television and argue that these innovations enable a school district to provide high quality, low cost instruction in virtually any subject to very small numbers of students.

The deficiencies of voluntary sharing and the new instructional technologies are sufficiently serious to convince us that, for the foreseeable future, neither will solve the problems related to by small size. In regard to voluntary sharing, the literature abounds with articles extolling its virtues and exhorting neighboring small rural school districts to share their resources. Yet, few do. We have found that there are good reasons for this. Similarly, the structural constraints surrounding the introduction of technology--the marketing of software and the extraordinary scheduling difficulties entailed by interactive television, to name only two—make us dubious of the viability of these approaches.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Given these conclusions, we suggest three broad, interrelated changes in state policy. We have made these suggested changes more specific by attaching several concrete recommendations to each. All of these are characterized by a central thrust. We believe that New York State should adopt a more balanced approach to the problems of its small rural schools. That is, our recommendations are intended to provide districts with a greater range of options for dealing with their specific problems, options that permit local boards of education to take into account the particular circumstances in their communities. The problems these school systems face are rarely just a consequence of their small size, hence they rarely will be solved by becoming larger. The fundamental flaw inherent in current state policy has been its inordinate emphasis on just such a solution. A more balanced approach is required.

Our call for more options at the local level can be easily misconstrued. We are not advocating unbridled "local control." The problems are too complex for such simplistic solutions. At base, education is a State responsibility. The State has a constitutional obligation to insure that some children do not receive an inferior education merely because they happen to live in a small rural community. Thus, New York State has an obligation to set educational standards and to insure that every school district within its borders meets those standards. In all that we say in the following pages, we have assumed that the State will—and should—continue to specify and enforce standards regarding both school programs and student achievement.

Much controversy surrounds this matter of setting standards, witness the rancor aroused in some quarters by the recently adopted Regents Action Plan. While we did not study the impact of the Plan, it is certain that some of its requirements are especially burdensome to small rural districts. A simple way to lighten these burdens, of course, is to relax the standards. Undoubtedly there will be considerable pressure on the State to do just that.

In our report we assume that the State will resist such pressures. We assume that it will attempt to assure rural children of an education equal to that of their urban and suburban counterparts. Under this assumption, it is imperative that the State provide small districts with the means to meet its standards. Continuing to treat district reorganization as the preferred solution to the problems of small size is an unbalanced approach. It does not reliably solve the problems it is reputed to solve; it arguably creates new problems; and it is irrelevant to some of the more serious problems faced by rural schools.

With these understandings as background then, we propose three broad changes in state policy. These are labelled A, B and C below. In order to implement these broad changes, we also propose a series of numbered, specific changes in state procedures and law.

A. *The State should make it possible for school districts to give unbiased consideration to traditional reorganization as a solution to the problems of small size.*

Turning small rural school districts into large rural school districts is one approach to their educational problems. However, it is not so patently superior to other strategies to warrant the preferred status which the State grants it. We recommend that New York create the conditions that will allow an unbiased consideration of all the alternatives to district reorganization. Only in this way can school districts select the option that best addresses their particular problems, free of extraneous considerations.

In order for this unbiased consideration to happen, the State will have to take two actions. It will have to remove the impediments to district reorganization, and it will have to reform its use of the incentives that encourage it. In regard to the first of these actions, we make the following recommendations:

1. Ballots should be counted separately in each community for all reorganization referenda. A majority of voters in each district should be required in order for the reorganization to be approved.
2. Procedures should be established that will make it possible for voters to know, prior to a reorganization referendum, who will govern the new district if the reorganization is approved, and what its characteristics will be (e.g., in what schools the various grades will be housed).
3. A procedure should be establish that would permit a reorganizing district to avoid incurring the debts or deferred maintenance costs of its partner.
4. Steps should be taken to make districts' wealth irrelevant to their voters' reorganization decisions.

In regard to the second action, reforming the use of incentives to reorganization, we recommend:

5. The financial incentives provided for district reorganization should be eliminated. These should be replaced by a program of transition aid based on the actual costs of effecting a given reorganization.
6. The 1958 Master Plan (revised) should cease to serve as an official basis for providing or not providing regular building aid to districts.
7. School boards should be helped to make better judgments concerning the qualifications of the consultants they hire to carry out feasibility and efficiency grant studies and to evaluate the worth of the completed research.

We have said that it is very important for the State to take a more balanced approach to the problems of small rural schools. A start toward achieving such a balance would be accomplished by adopting these seven recommendations. However, while we believe that these changes are necessary, we also believe them to be insufficient. Their adoption simply permits local school districts to more rationally consider the merits of traditional reorganization as a solution to the problems of small size. But it is also important for the State to provide new solutions. Our second general recommendation and its three specific proposals concern this matter.

B. *The State should provide additional organizational alternatives to small rural school districts.*

As we have noted, there are numerous problems facing small school systems, and each system is characterized by a relatively unique constellation of those problems. When a district examines the possibility of using reorganization to address its peculiar set of problems, however, it will find that there are relatively few options available to it. Each of these is flawed in various ways, and it is likely that none will precisely meet the district's needs. Further, as it presently stands, reorganization is an all or nothing proposition. Thus, small rural school districts must select from a very limited range of predetermined options and must embrace that option in its entirety. Finally, reorganizations are permanent. If the residents of two merged districts later decide that they have made a mistake, they will find they cannot undo their action. The State will not permit "demerger."

We recommend that the State increase the range of alternatives available to its school districts. Specifically:

8. Procedures should be implemented that would permit the partial reorganization of school districts.
9. Opportunities should be broadened for institutionalized sharing among neighboring school districts.
10. Increased support should be provided for development and demonstration projects involving interactive telecommunications.

Permitting districts to give an unbiased consideration to reorganization and increasing the number of organizational alternatives available to them will go a long way to helping small rural schools address their problems. However, many of those problems simply transcend organizational solutions. Our final general recommendation and its specific implementing procedures are directed at problems that extend beyond the scope of organizational solutions.

C. *The State should be more tolerant of and accept greater financial responsibility for the cost of expanding educational opportunities in small rural schools.*

None of the organizational alternatives we studied can eliminate the extra cost of providing education in small rural settings. The alternatives vary with respect to the magnitude of these additional costs and how they are apportioned between the local community and the State. But the fact remains that the extra costs are present. If New York is serious about expanding educational opportunities in small rural schools, these additional costs must be borne. We believe the State shares responsibility for them. Specifically:

11. A program of "necessity aid" should be established for small rural districts.

Necessity aid should be a wealth-equalized program of general aid based solely on district enrollment levels. We recommend that this aid be provided to districts with 400 or fewer pupils enrolled in grades 9-12 and that its magnitude be inversely related to the number of pupils enrolled in these grades. Notice that wealthy small districts will not qualify for aid under these provisions. We use the term "necessity" to state clearly that the aid is designed to offset the unavoidable costs associated with operating small school districts in compliance with state-set standards.

Finally, in our study of small rural schools we frequently found problems that were not, strictly speaking, a consequence of size or rural location. Among these the following were particularly notable: the shortage of qualified teachers in certain subject areas; the parochialism of educators and board members; the limited usefulness of existing educational software; the difficulties schools face in scheduling courses for students with unusual interests or needs; and the narrow and depressed aspirations of students in their post-graduation plans. Our final recommendation concerns matters such as these:

12. The State should expand its program of categorical aids to address problems that are common in, but not unique to, small rural districts.

Although we did not survey all of the districts in New York State, there is ample reason to believe that many of the problems we observed are common to all school systems. For example, poorly designed and relatively useless educational software seems to be the norm, and it almost certainly is thwarting every district's attempt to use computers effectively. Other difficulties that we noted, even if they are common, are undoubtedly made worse by small size and rural location. The difficulty small districts have in recruiting racially and ethnically diverse faculties is illustrative. Finally, some of their predicaments are largely of the State's making. The shortage of foreign language teachers is a good example. Through appropriately-crafted categorical aid programs, the State could significantly alleviate some of these problems.

CONCLUSION

Taken together, these twelve recommendations constitute a substantial evolution in state policy regarding school district organization. Our historical analyses demonstrate a longstanding commitment to increasing school district size in New York State. We are aware of no other area of public planning characterized by such a single-minded pursuit of a policy in the absence of a solid supporting research base.

This single-minded pursuit of district reorganization may once have made sense. In 1986, however, district reorganization has largely run its course. Most of the remaining small districts are "hard cases" that, short of outright state mandate, will refuse to reorganize. What can we do with these hard cases? We suggest settling for whatever program consolidation can be accomplished (either through partial reorganization or through what we call institutionalized sharing) and accepting the higher cost of small-scale operations.

We have discussed these matters with our advisory board and privately with officials at the State Education Department. Our recommendations run counter to the thinking of some educational professionals in New York, especially those at the State level. There, the commitment to district reorganization runs deep. We are convinced, however, that we have read correctly the facts surrounding New York State's reorganization policy. It is a policy without plausible warrant.

The controversy that will surround these recommendations has implications for the next steps the State should take. Many ideas for broadening the alternatives available to small rural school districts have been discussed informally in New York State for a long time, yet little systematic attention has been paid to them. Few reorganizations have occurred in recent years, and the State Education Department has a limited number of staff members available to study organizational structures. The problems of small rural schools require greater and more immediate attention than has been forthcoming, and the State should develop a concrete, broadened plan for addressing them. Such a plan must not rest on the discredited assumption that creating large school districts from small ones necessarily solves any problems.

We have reached a critical juncture in the life of small rural schools in New York State. The Legislature charted a new direction when it commissioned this study. The next step—that of fashioning concrete legislative proposals—is crucial to the larger effort of improving New York's small rural schools.

Chapter 1

Starting Points: The Folklore of Schooling in Rural New York State

In October 1984 the State Legislature authorized a study of New York State's small rural schools. Specifically, the Legislature asked Cornell University to examine the condition of those schools and to recommend organizational alternatives for them. This is the report of that research.

The time was ripe for this study. The last large-scale research concerned with the organization of small rural schools was conducted in the late 1950s. The results of that work, embodied in the *Master Plan for School District Reorganization in New York State*[1] ("The Master Plan"), have guided the organization and reorganization of school districts since that time.

In the nearly thirty years that have intervened, much has changed in New York State's educational scene. The expansion of Boards of Cooperative Educational Services (BOCES), the advent of new instructional technologies, the emergence of teachers' unions and the Regents Action Plan are but a few of the innovations that have transformed—and are transforming—the State's educational landscape. These alterations, along with countless others, make it necessary for the State to consider again the question of how best to organize and deliver educational services to its rural youth.

Further, there is a great deal of evidence that such a reconsideration has been going on, albeit informally, for some time. Examples include the range of BOCES services which has recently expanded. The newly implemented efficiency grant program has given rural schools an opportunity to study and address their own problems in new ways. The apparent willingness of the State to approve building programs that are outside of the Master Plan has been an important policy shift. Perhaps most notably, the number of school district reorganizations has fallen to nearly zero in the past few years. All of these suggest that residents, educators and State officials are beginning to rethink their positions regarding the problems of small rural schools.

State policies regarding this matter have been evolutionary in nature. Current views of school district reorganization have evolved from those reflected in the Master Plan of 1958, which in turn developed from strategies adopted in the 1940s. The major purpose of this research, then, is to provide the Legislature with information and suggestions concerning the further evolution of its policy toward the small rural schools of New York State.

When we began this work, three sets of ideas were brought immediately and forcefully to our attention. People have, we discovered, quite definite notions about small rural schools—what is right and wrong with them and what should be done to improve them. We shall refer to these ideas as the "folklore" of rural education. By folklore we do not mean to suggest that these ideas are necessarily wrong. We simply mean that they are commonly assumed to be correct without critical examination. Folklore, in this sense, is just a body of traditional, plausible and widely held beliefs about a matter of importance. The problem is that folklore is also a mixture of truth and wishful thinking; it makes a good story. It is the sort of thing that we tell our children—tales about the good (or bad) old days in little country schools.

Folklore is a poor basis for State policy, however. For policy purposes, it is important to know what is true and what is wishful thinking about the truth. In a sense, we and our associates have spent much of the last two years studying this folklore, trying to separate the former from the latter. Herewith then, are some of the central beliefs in three areas of this folklore, beliefs that shape many people's thinking about small rural schools and that formed the starting points for our research. We have termed these: The Folklore of Consequences, The Folklore of Reorganization, and The Folklore of Sharing and Technology.

STARTING POINT 1: THE FOLKLORE OF CONSEQUENCES

There is certainly no shortage of ideas and opinions about what is right and wrong with New York State's small rural school districts. People who had attended a school in one of the State's tiny villages were quite capable of recounting their schools' strengths and weaknesses to us—and generalizing their opinions to all other small schools. Further, lack of direct experience was no deterrent to holding strong opinions. Other people, products of some of the largest districts in the State, were equally capable of telling us the virtues and vices of low-enrollment schools. Indeed, sometimes the accounts of the latter group sounded more plausible than those of the former. In any case, one of the first things we learned was that there is a folklore about the consequences of small rural schools—consequences for pupils, teachers and communities.

Much of this folklore extolled these schools' virtues. They had, we were told, many advantages over their larger, more urban counterparts. For example, we were informed that:

> Students get to know each other better in small schools. Since people are more likely to care about persons they know, a supportive environment develops in them that contrasts sharply with the isolation and estrangement students feel in larger schools. For the same reason there is little of the cliquishness that one finds in bigger institutions.
>
> Teachers have more extensive contacts with their students, because these contacts are not limited to the classroom. They meet and interact with pupils (and their parents) on the streets, in the stores and at community events. Because of this, teachers become more familiar with pupils and are better able to meet their needs.
>
> Teacher-student contacts are also more intensive, especially at the secondary level. This is a consequence of the fact that there are fewer teachers in small schools and they typically cover several levels of a subject. The math teacher will have the same pupils for algebra, geometry and trigonometry, for example. This too permits teachers to better understand their students' needs.
>
> Students are more likely to participate in extracurricular activities in small schools. They become involved. This involvement provides opportunities for them to develop their leadership skills, and it helps

> to combat the alienation from school that is so rampant in urban districts. Further, participation in the extra-curriculum gives students, who are not talented academically, a chance to excel at school.
>
> The school is the social center of small rural communities. It not only provides an education to children, it also serves as a site for community meetings, and its athletic teams are a source of community pride. Hence, it touches the lives of all residents and serves to bind them together.
>
> Because these small districts have only one high school (and sometimes only one elementary school as well) that school brings the children of all residents together. The children of relatively wealthy parents attend class with the children of the less fortunate. People of different religious faiths rub elbows daily. Hence, these schools really are, in Jefferson's sense, "common schools." They are able to teach respect for others and for democratic values in ways that urban and suburban schools never can.
>
> Classes are small. This enables teachers to individualize their instruction and, as a consequence, pupils learn more.
>
> There is greater consensus among administrators, teachers and parents about important educational goals. As a result, there is less strife over schools in small towns than in larger ones, with a consequent improvement in the educational climate of the community.
>
> Teacher quality is higher in small school districts. Fundamentally this is because principals in these districts must dismiss incompetents. They do not have the option of transferring inept teachers to other buildings in their districts, a yearly routine in large systems that Bridges has called "the dance of the lemons."[2]

If these advantages are part of a folklore regarding small rural schools, we also heard that these same schools had other, less admirable qualities. For example, we were told that:

> Teachers must cover too many subjects. In a high school with only one science teacher for example, that teacher must master all commonly taught subjects—earth science, biology, chemistry, etc. That is impossible. Inevitably some subjects are poorly taught. An analogous phenomenon occurs in the extra-curriculum. Teachers are pressed into coaching or advising activities for which they have little interest or preparation.
>
> Scheduling problems become severe. Often subjects can be offered only in alternate years, with the consequence that a student who gets out of synchrony is denied an opportunity to take or retake a subject. For example, a student who fails biology may be unable to retake the course.
>
> Some students have to travel unconscionable distances to school. This interferes with their academic work and their participation in after-school activities.
>
> Small schools find it impossible to recruit or retain competent faculty. Teachers prefer urban or suburban situations to the isolation of rural

areas. Further, small rural school systems pay their teachers less well, so good teachers don't come, or they leave at the first opportunity. The same can be said of administrators.

> Some students are pressured into activities that they would rather avoid. For example, if a school is to field the usual complement of athletic teams, some pupils find themselves involved in sports when they would prefer spending their leisure time in other ways. Worse, some are pressed into sports for which they are physically unsuited.
>
> Students who do not relate well to a particular teacher have no possibility of avoiding him or her. Indeed, they may have that person for several different subjects over as many years. In the same way, they cannot avoid an incompetent teacher. Further, if a teacher has inappropriate expectations of a pupil, perhaps from having had an older sibling, those expectations have a much greater opportunity to adversely affect the student.
>
> Aspiration levels tend to be low. Most pupils do not go on to higher education and those that do seldom attend four-year colleges, private institutions or universities located outside of New York State. Instead, even the most talented end up attending the nearest two-year school.
>
> Small secondary schools have little of the curricular diversity that characterizes larger high schools. Teachers are spread thinly in order to cover required subjects; hence, they cannot offer advanced placement or elective courses. Similarly, curricula are dominated by Regents courses, putting vocational students at a substantial disadvantage.
>
> Too much emphasis is placed on athletics. This occurs primarily because the school is a prominent source of communities' recreational opportunities. This emphasis on athletics causes eligibility criteria to disappear. In small rural schools academic matters take a backseat to football and basketball.

It would be possible to go on, but by now the point should be obvious. It is not simply that this folklore attributes both advantages and disadvantages to small rural schools. Nor is it that where one person sees strength another sees weakness. The striking thing is that the same objective conditions—small size and a rural setting—can plausibly and simultaneously lead to quite opposite consequences. For example, if small size causes teachers to get to know their charges better and thereby better meet their needs, it also provides enormously increased opportunities for misjudgments, and for those misjudgments to have seriously harmful effects.

At the outset most of these consequences, both positive and negative, seemed plausible results of small size, but we had little evidence that they actually occurred. For policy-making purposes, it is important to discover the facts of these matters. In part, our data gathering activities were geared to do that. Although we could not investigate all of the assertions made to us about small rural schools, we used some of these assertions to structure our interviews and observations. In Chapter 3 of this report we present our findings and conclusions concerning some of this folklore of consequences.

STARTING POINT 2: THE FOLKLORE OF REORGANIZATION[3]

If there is a folklore about the advantages and disadvantages of small rural school districts, there is an analogous folklore about what needs to be done to correct their deficiencies. In this case, however, the folklore is qualitatively different: much of it has been codified into State policy and law.

Certainly the most conspicuous aspect of this set of beliefs is the idea that many of New York State's rural schools are "too small." The first question one might ask when this assertion is made is obvious: When is a school "too small?" Here, an authoritative answer is at hand. The 1958 Master Plan states that a high school is too small if it enrolls fewer than five hundred students and that seven hundred is closer to the optimal number. It also asserts that an elementary school is too small if it serves fewer than 140 pupils, and that an enrollment between 420 and 630 is preferable.[4] Thus, New York State itself provides a definition of "too small."

We treated these numbers—and the underlying idea that schools can be "too small"—as elements of the reorganization folklore. They required examination.

The State has had a long-standing interest in school size. Since the early years of this century, New York State has sought to reorganize its numerous small school districts into fewer but larger organizational entities. The reasons for its concern with small size are also part of the folklore of reorganization. Obviously, small size, *per se*, is not a problem, and the State has not been much concerned—at least officially—about many of the matters we have already discussed. For example, it has not claimed that there is too much emphasis on athletics in small rural schools. Rather, the State's concerns have been more fundamental: schools that are too small are said to deny children equality of educational opportunity, and they are said to be highly inefficient.

These are very serious charges. Many residents forget that education is a state function, not a local one. New York State may not legitimately permit some of its citizens to receive an inferior education merely because they happen to live in rural areas. Nor may it permit other of its citizens to be unfairly burdened with high taxes for the same reason. If small rural school districts unavoidably produce these effects, New York State is obliged to eliminate them. We studied these central aspects of the reorganization folklore by posing this question: Do small rural schools violate norms of equity and efficiency?

The State's position on this question is clear: small rural school districts do violate norms of equity and efficiency. Operating on that assumption for several decades, the State has sought ways to get small districts to reorganize into larger ones.

Over the years New York State has gradually shifted its approach to this problem. Its earlier position could be characterized as enabling. That is, the Legislature passed laws that required local initiative to effect a reorganization. No incentives were attached to doing so. By and large this approach did not work. In time the Legislature began to provide financial incentives to promote school reorganizations. Currently, those financial incentives are quite substantial.

Overall, the incentive strategy has been remarkably successful. Thousands of school districts combined with their neighbors during the 1940s and 1950s.

However, the number of reorganizations has fallen drastically during the last decade, yet many small rural schools continue to exist. This has led some to call for still higher levels of financial incentives. Another aspect of the reorganization folklore, then, concerns these incentives. It suggests that local citizens who continue to resist reorganization do so because the monetary rewards are insufficient. We investigated this belief.

Finally, a last aspect of the folklore of reorganization concerns the efficacy of the strategy itself. New York State has encouraged its small rural school districts to combine with their neighbors to solve the problems of equity and efficiency. But does reorganization accomplish that? Further, even if the strategy has met the State's objectives, have there been unintended and perhaps undesirable consequences of the process?

In Chapter 4 of this report we consider the folklore of reorganization. We examine the State's response to the problems of small size, the issues of equity and efficiency, the reasons behind citizens' resistance to reorganization, and the effectiveness of the reorganization strategy.

STARTING POINT 3: THE FOLKLORE OF ALTERNATIVES

A final starting point for this research has been alternatives to school district reorganization. What other mechanisms exist to alleviate the problems of size? Just as a folklore has grown up around district reorganization as a solution to these problems, another folklore surrounds alternatives to them.

One of the oldest of these alternatives concerns various mechanisms for interdistrict sharing of resources. According to the folklore on this matter, many of the problems of small size would be alleviated if neighboring school districts simply worked out voluntary cooperative arrangements to share resources. If, for example, neighboring districts have too few students interested in advanced placement physics to offer a course in that subject, these districts might pool their resources and offer one course to their combined student bodies. Similarly, physical equipment could be purchased and shared in a cooperative manner. Such voluntary arrangements have been discussed and extolled for years. Curiously—for the folklore on this matter is so commonsensical and favorable—relatively little of this sort of sharing is going on. We wondered why, and looked into the efficacy of such arrangements.

A variant on this voluntary interdistrict sharing in New York State is, of course, BOCES. When these districts were established, it was widely held that they would alleviate many of the problems of small rural schools. It is clear that the BOCES have experienced considerable success in meeting this objective. Yet, it is widely believed that their success has not been unqualified. Over the years a folklore regarding these institutions has grown up, a folklore regarding the reasons for their success and its lack. We enquired into this folklore. We did not, however, undertake a thorough study of BOCES as mechanisms for sharing programs. Such a study would have been well beyond the scope of our undertaking.

Finally, we considered the folklore that surrounds some of the new instructional technologies. We asked whether or not the problems of small rural schools could be solved by adopting new ways to deliver instruction in rural areas. For example, it is commonly believed that computers can provide high quality and cost-effective instruction to rural children. The cost of these machines has fallen dramatically in recent years. Can rural schools put the computer equivalent of a high quality physics teacher, for example, in front of any student who wants instruction in that subject? The cost of doing so should be hardly more than that of a few floppy disks. Is that the case?

Similarly, we investigated the possibility that interactive television would serve the same goal. In one small district that we visited, we watched an accomplished teacher instruct a small number of pupils in his own classroom. The size of that class ordinarily would make its offering prohibitively expensive. But this teacher was simultaneously instructing students in two other school districts. These distant pupils were able to see and be seen; they were able to talk with their classmates in the other schools and to their instructor; they could show the teacher their work; and they always had a good view of the chalkboard.

We investigated the claims of the proponents of interactive instructional television. Does this technology offer a solution to many of the problems of small rural schools? Does it eliminate the obstacle of distance by eliminating the need to transport either pupils or teachers to a central location?

Thus, just as there is a folklore about the consequences of attending small rural schools and another about district reorganization, there is a folklore about sharing and educational technology. In Chapter 5 we turn our attention to it.

Finally, in Chapter 6 we present our conclusions and recommendations. We do not offer these as definitive solutions to the problems of small size. Indeed, if we have learned anything as a result of this study, it is that such solutions are illusory. But our reading of the history of these matters has also taught us that the State's policy toward its small rural schools has been a search for better—even if not definitive—solutions to their problems.

New York State's policy in this area has never been static. It has evolved continuously as a result of the interactions of the Legislature, State officials, professional educators, and the public. At each step along this evolutionary path the overriding goal has been to improve the quality of the educational services delivered to rural youth. We view our study as a contribution to those interactions and to the further evolution of State policy in pursuit of that goal.

Notes

1. University of the State of New York, *Master Plan for School District Reorganization in New York State* (Revised), (Albany, N.Y.: The State Education Department, 1958).
2. Edwin M. Bridges, *The Incompetent Teacher*. (Philadelphia: The Falmer, Press, 1986.)
3. We are going to use terms such as "reorganization," "consolidation," "centralization," and "merger" interchangeably to signify the process whereby a single school district is created where two or more had previously existed. We are aware that this is imprecise usage. State law makes distinctions among various forms of reorganization—e.g., between annexation, centralization, and consolidation. Where such distinctions are important, we will make them.
4. University of the State of New York, *Master Plan*, p. 11.

Chapter 2

Methods: Studying Small Rural School Districts

This study examines some of the prospects and problems faced by small rural schools and considers various solutions to their problems. We approached this task with three strategies: (1) We carried out eight comprehensive case studies at sites around New York State; (2) We reviewed research literature on issues that bear on problems of small rural districts; (3) We analyzed quantitative and survey data collected for this project. This chapter briefly describes these strategies.

CASE STUDIES

We considered, but quickly discarded, the possibility of surveying a large number of school districts in the State. Such a survey would have produced a great deal of easily quantified data. It would also, however, have required us to have clearly in mind the precise nature of the problems we expected to find. Moreover, those problems would have to be the kind about which we could ask sensible and useful questions--preferably questions that require our respondents to check an appropriate box on a survey instrument. Neither of these conditions was met.

Everyone (ourselves included) has preconceptions about the problems in the rural schools of New York State. We referred to these preconceptions as the "Folklore of Consequences" in the last chapter. We were sure, for example, that these districts would have difficulty offering a large number of elective courses. But we knew that our assumptions were not exhaustive. That is, we were certain there would be important problems of which we were unaware. To design a survey in ignorance of them would be to miss them entirely. Further, even if our prior knowledge had been exhaustive, many of the problems we correctly anticipated were impossible to formulate in a way that would let us ask sensible and useful questions.

For example, we fully expected that providing an adequate high school curriculum in a school of 200 students would be difficult. But would that also be true if the school had 300 or 400 students? How would curricular deficiencies affect pupils? How would they affect teachers? How were districts trying to deal with such deficiencies? In short, we know little about the limits and effects of this curriculum problem. In addition, its exact nature was not obvious. For example, what precisely is an "adequate" curriculum? Why might a curriculum that is adequate in one place be inadequate in another?

In such situations it is preferable to approach research problems in an open-ended fashion—asking questions as the situation dictates and changing course as new avenues of interest open or as additional information comes to light. In short, it makes sense to conduct unstructured interviews with many different people in each community.

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Our case study approach allowed us to conduct intensive, lengthy interviews with a variety of people. We interviewed District Superintendents, school board members, administrators, teachers, students, bus drivers, PTA members and district residents—people knowledgeable about local school systems and with different (and often conflicting) perspectives. We collected documentary evidence about each district—the minutes of board meetings, budgets, and publications of all kinds (for example, yearbooks and newsletters). We combed local papers for articles about the schools. We attended board meetings. We followed local events, such as budget referenda, that occurred during our study. Further, we did not concentrate only on school systems. We were interested in each community as a whole—in how economics, politics, religion, and social organization impinge on its schools. In short, we compiled a massive amount of information about each place we studied.

In each case, the principal investigators and the project's Research Associate first visited the site and spoke with administrators and board members. (Sometimes the site involved more than one district.) One or more of seven graduate students in the Department of Education at Cornell assisted on each trip. If the district(s) agreed to participate in the study and met our criteria for inclusion, one of these graduate students accepted the primary responsibility for collecting data. These individuals followed up leads, taped and transcribed interviews, and created files of data. Finally, each wrote a case study describing the community and its schools and focusing on issues and concerns. These case studies became an important source of data for this report.

This strategy—which provided a rich source of information about a small number of rural schools—not only tells us what has happened (and is happening) in them, it allows us to understand why events have unfolded as they have.

Like any research strategy, however, it also has disadvantages. Perhaps chief among these is a lack of generalizability. Case studies are expensive; our data, though rich, have been costly. We could study only eight sites on our limited budget. Further, those sites were selected not as a representative sample of small rural schools in the State, but as examples of situations that interested us. We cannot be sure how well our conclusions generalize to other districts.

We are bothered—but not much—by this lack of generalizability. We were primarily interested in understanding these communities and their schools. We wanted, for example, to understand the intentions and actions of administrators, State Education Department officials, and community residents in instances of school reorganization. Understanding these intentions and actions is much more likely using a case study approach. Further, when we discern the same motives and behavior in several different situations, we can be reasonably confident that they have also operated in other times and places. Thus, if we have traded some technical generalizability for a better understanding of small rural schools, we view that trade as highly desirable.

As we have noted, we chose our sites with particular goals in mind. Each site had some significant experience with an alternative organizational solution to the problems of small size in a rural setting. Some of the cases involved studying district reorganizations and their long- and short-term effects. To our knowledge, this is the first time these effects have been investigated in New York State.[1]

Other cases involved instances where districts refused to accept reorganizations. Again, to the best of our knowledge, this is the first disciplined attempt to understand the reasons for community resistance to reorganization. Still other sites were chosen because they have had experience with alternatives to reorganization, including interdistrict sharing and the innovative use of instructional technologies.

Visits to sites began in the spring of 1985 and ended in the winter of 1986. Sites include districts in the Southern Tier, the Adirondacks, the Catskills, the Finger Lakes, and Long Island. Below we briefly describe each of these case studies. In keeping with our promise of confidentiality, the names of all districts and of the persons we interviewed have been changed. The title and author of each case study are given in a footnote to each description.

Gramville-Ellison[2]

This case study involves two very small neighboring districts that recently agreed to centralize. After centralization the new district is still small by most standards; it serves fewer than 600 students. Gramville-Ellison gave us an opportunity to study the process of reorganization while it was still fresh in participants' minds and to view the immediate consequences of that action.

Hamlet and Southeast Central[3]

This is a case study of two very small districts. The first, Hamlet, operates a program that is in many respects admirable. It has refused to reorganize, although in many ways it looks ripe to do so. It is extraordinarily small (about 190 students in grades K-12), it is not far from its neighbors, and its neighbors are similar to it in many important ways. The central question is whether the district should reorganize. To address this question, we compared Hamlet with Southeast Central, a neighboring district that centralized almost 14 years ago. Had this neighbor not reorganized, its three component districts would be similar to Hamlet. The case study provides insight into how agonizing a reorganization decision can be for a community.

Eatonton[4]

This study examines a troubled reorganization that took place almost twenty years ago. It demonstrates the far-reaching and long-lasting consequences of imposing a reorganization on two communities in which significant opposition existed. The referendum was narrowly approved, though there was a continuing dispute over whether a majority vote was actually obtained. The ill-will generated by this centralization has haunted the district ever since, affecting the lives of residents and students through its legacy of continual turmoil in district governance.

Applegate and Bakerville[5]

Two neighboring districts are the subjects of this study in contrasts. The two districts are similar in terms of social, economic, and demographic characteristics. Moreover, their enrollment levels are comparable. Despite these similarities, there are substantial differences in the quality of the two school systems. Our interest in these districts concerned the roots of these differences. Why is it that some small schools offer quite good programs, while others, seemingly similarly situated, do not? Put another way, what, besides size, affects the quality of a district's offerings?

Yorkville[6]

Yorkville was chosen for study because it is geographically very large, encompasses several distinct communities, and uses a new instructional technology. Here, our purposes were to improve our understanding of the consequences of large distance, the internal tensions that can exist among distinct communities within a single district, and the impact of the new technology on life within the school.

New Hope and Arcadia[7].

This is another study of two districts that seem ripe for reorganization. Indeed, they appeared so ripe that the State took a special interest in achieving one. It hoped that its strategy for doing so would serve as a model for other districts around New York. This reorganization attempt was "done right," in the sense that there was a deliberate, highly successful effort to involve the communities in the decision-making process. Further, residents were given large amounts of information about the benefits of a merger. The reorganization, however, was rejected in a landslide vote. New Hope and Arcadia permitted us to examine the reasons why people reject consolidation when their rejection clearly is not based on ignorance of the facts, ungrounded fears, or perceptions of having been excluded from the decision process.

Knowville[8]

This is a study of a small troubled district that thinks it is poorer than it actually is. The district has a long history of rejecting spending proposals for items above and beyond immediate needs. This lack of planning and apparently unjustified frugality is deeply rooted and of long duration. Building and reorganization proposals come and go, generate opposition, and are ultimately rejected. The district usually takes actions with long-term implications only when forced by state mandates. Neighboring school systems refuse to consider merging with Knowville, in part because of this history and its consequences for Knowville's facilities. Knowville, then, was selected because it illustrates some of the most severe problems of small rural schools. Yet, even in this district, many positive things are happening.

Twisselton[9]

This is a study of an organizational alternative that has been employed only once in recent New York State history. Twisselton, like Knowville, was deeply troubled. In this case, the solution to those troubles was to eliminate them by eliminating the district. We studied Twisselton because radical solutions can be instructive of the consequences of less extreme ones. The case throws light upon the substantial educational benefits that can be derived from reorganization—and on the substantial social cost a community may have to pay to obtain them.

REVIEWS OF RESEARCH

These eight case studies were an important source of information for this project. They were not, however, our only source. Mindful of the limitations of the case study approach, we also carried out extensive reviews of the research on problems of small rural schools. We reasoned that, although New York State is in some respects unique, all of the problems of its small schools are not, nor are some of the solutions to those problems. We can learn from the experience of others. In this section we discuss these research reviews. The authors and titles of the documents that resulted from these reviews are provided in footnotes.

The History of Reorganization in New York State[10]

Obviously, school reorganization did not begin with Eatonton, the oldest reorganization we studied. It began well over a century ago. As we noted in the previous chapter, one of the major purposes of this research was to suggest directions for the further evolution of state policy with regard to school district organization. In order to make suggestions about where New York State should go, it was imperative that we understand where it has been. Accordingly, one of our associates carried out a historical review of state policy on this matter. This review also revealed that the process of reorganization has always been contentious.

School District Size and Its Consequences[11]

Wherever we turned, people had strong views on the consequences of small size. State officials, school administrators, and some parents told us, for example, that small school districts were unable to offer adequate programs to students and that small size created excessive financial burdens. Hence, students were denied equal educational opportunities and communities were paying too much for what they were getting. Others in the same roles told us that small size is desirable because it leads to more intimate student-teacher contact and more well-rounded social development.

We wondered if such assertions were correct. To carry out original investigations of these matters would have required vastly more resources than were available to us. Further, such an effort would have duplicated a great deal of existing research literature. Accordingly, one of our associates reviewed the research on the economic and psychological consequences of small size. Although most of that research was not conducted in New York State, its general conclusions certainly apply.

Instructional Technology[12]

One obvious alternative to reorganization as a solution to the problems of size is to adopt new instructional technologies. This solution is being tested around New York State. Indeed, we chose one of our case studies partly because of its innovative use of interactive television. We were loathe, however, to seek out many such implementations and base our conclusions about the promise of technology on them. We made this decision partly because of resource constraints. More importantly, however, a burgeoning research literature (some of it experimental) already speaks to the prospect of technological solutions to problems of size.

In his review of this literature, our associate was especially attentive to computer-assisted instruction, intelligent videodiscs, and interactive telecommunications. These technologies seemed to us to be particularly suited to problems small districts have in providing an adequate variety of courses.

Interdistrict Sharing[13]

Another frequently discussed solution to size problems is for districts to share resources. New York State has a long history of promoting sharing through its Boards of Cooperative Educational Services (BOCES). Recently, the State has embarked on an extensive effort to increase sharing—both within and outside of BOCES—by funding local studies of this strategy's possibilities.

Our associate reviewed research on this strategy and studied its use in several regions of New York State. His paper is particularly attentive to the cost of sharing resources, which in some instances is quite substantial.

ADDITIONAL ANALYSES

In addition to the case studies and the research reviews just described, we carried out (or commissioned) two additional studies. The first concerned program comprehensiveness. The second involved a survey of New York State's retired and current District Superintendents.

Program Comprehensiveness[14]

Small school districts are often said to be unable to offer comprehensive secondary school programs. Further, small size is thought to increase scheduling conflicts and diminish teacher specialization. These consequences, if they exist, could lower the quality of education students receive in small schools. Clearly such consequences can exist: a high school with one student could not offer a comprehensive program without incurring astronomical costs. What is unclear, however, is the relationship between size and program comprehensiveness.

The nature of this relationship is important to determine. If high school program comprehensiveness increases in a linear fashion, size increases will contribute consistently to program quality regardless of how large a school becomes. However, if there is some point where larger enrollments do not lead to better programs, there will be limits to any gains resulting from reorganizing districts in order to create larger secondary schools. Accordingly, a study of high schools with various levels of enrollment (from 100 to 3,000 pupils) enabled us to examine how program comprehensiveness changes as size increases.

District Superintendents[15]

It is doubtful that any group of men and women has had more influence on school district reorganization than New York's District Superintendents. Because of their dual role as officers of the State and local educators, they have had a major impact on the implementation of state policy. We thought it important to more fully understand the part they have played. Accordingly, we commissioned a survey of current and retired District Superintendents. This study, based on mailed questionnaires, telephone interviews, letters, and other documents, has greatly increased our understanding of why school districts have been consolidated in New York State during the past several decades.

CONCLUSION

These, then, are the methods we have used to study organizational alternatives for small rural schools in New York State. We have approached our problem from various perspectives. We have used eight intensive case studies of small rural districts. We have conducted thorough reviews of the relevant research. We have carried out a historical review of State policy. We have executed a rigorous statistical analysis of data collected by the State that pertains to high school programs. We have surveyed principal actors involved in school consolidations.

We have not relied entirely on any one of these sources of information. Rather, we have sought to test tentative conclusions derived from one source of data with information derived from other sources. We are confident of the findings and conclusions that we report in the next three chapters. In Chapter 3 we examine the prospects and problems of small rural school districts. In Chapter 4 we turn to the State's preferred solution to the problems of small size, district reorganization. Chapter 5 reports our conclusions regarding sharing and technology as alternatives to district reorganization. Finally, in Chapter 6 we draw this material together and present our recommendations regarding New York State's policy towards small rural schools.

Notes

1. They have, however, been investigated in other states. See for example, Alan Peshkin, *The Imperfect Union: School Consolidation and Community Conflict*, (Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 1982) and Jonathan P. Sher (ed.) *Education in Rural America: A Reassessment of Conventional Wisdom*. (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1977.
2. Gary Canter, "School District Reorganization: A Qualified Success," (Ithaca, New York: Unpublished manuscript, Department of Education, Cornell University, 1986).
3. Jane Robertson, "To Reorganize or Not to Reorganize: A Study of Choice in a Small-Rural District," (Ithaca, New York: Unpublished manuscript, Department of Education, Cornell University, 1986).
4. Kate S. Woodward, "Reorganization and Rancor: The Aftermath of a Troubled Reorganization," (Ithaca, New York: Unpublished manuscript, Department of Education, Cornell University, 1986).
5. Stephen L. Jacobson, "Administrative Leadership and Effective Small-Rural Schools: A Comparative Case Study," (Ithaca, New York: Unpublished manuscript, Department of Education, Cornell University, 1986).
6. Scott Bilow, "Long Term Results of Centralization: A Case Study of a Large-Rural New York School District," (Ithaca, New York: Unpublished manuscript, Department of Education, Cornell University, 1986).
7. Patrick Galvin, "Community Participation and School District Reorganization," (Ithaca, New York: Unpublished manuscript, Department of Education, Cornell University, 1986).
8. Jane Robertson, "A Small Rural Community's Poor Self Image and Its Impact on Educational Opportunities," (Ithaca, New York: Unpublished manuscript, Department of Education, Cornell University, 1986).
9. Pamela Ellis, "Little Reason for Being: A Case of School District Dissolution," (Ithaca, New York: Unpublished manuscript, Department of Education, Cornell University, 1986).
10. Kate S. Woodward, "Legal and Organizational History of School District Reorganization in New York State," (Ithaca, New York: Unpublished manuscript, Department of Education, Cornell University, 1986).
11. Scott Bilow, "The Size of School Districts: Economic and Psychological Perspectives," (Ithaca, New York: Unpublished manuscript, Department of Education, Cornell University, 1986).
12. Gary Canter, "The Promise of Educational Technology for Small-Rural Schools," (Ithaca, New York: Unpublished manuscript, Department of Education, Cornell University, 1986).
13. Patrick Galvin, "Sharing Among Separately Organized Administrative Units: Promise and Pitfalls," (Ithaca, New York: Unpublished manuscript, Department of Education, Cornell University, 1986).
14. David H. Monk, "Secondary School Size and Curricular Comprehensiveness," (Ithaca, New York: Unpublished manuscript, Department of Education, Cornell University, 1986). A revised version of this paper will appear in a forthcoming issue of *The Economics of Education Review*.
15. Charles E. Davis, "If We Can Haul the Milk, We Can Haul the Kids: A Personalized History of School District Reorganization in New York State," (Ithaca, New York: Unpublished manuscript, Department of Education, Cornell University, 1986).

Chapter 3

The Folklore of Consequences: Small Towns and Their Schools

In this chapter we will describe the towns and the schools we visited and our findings regarding them. We will also refer to our research reviews and our statistical analyses where that is appropriate. Throughout, we shall be attentive to both what is right as well as what is wrong with the schools we studied. Wherever possible we will let our respondents speak for themselves.

We have divided this chapter into several sections. In the first we discuss the communities we studied. Next we turn our attention to the schools themselves, describing their programs, teachers, students, and administrators. We close the chapter with our conclusions about the problems and strengths of small rural schools in New York State.

SMALL TOWNS, BIG PROBLEMS

In some respects the image Americans have of their small towns—shaded, tree-lined streets; a solid sense of community identity; friendly, caring neighbors; a reasonably stable economic base oriented to the surrounding farms; and a shared set of (perhaps somewhat conservative) values—describes the villages we visited. For many, it is a comforting image. And it is one seemingly shared by many of our respondents when they talked of life in their communities. Here is one woman, a PTA president and a self-described "outsider," trying to describe what she has termed the "aura" of life in her town:

> There's something that's here, I don't know what it is....This is where you live, this is home....The people that are here, this is their land. It's almost like going back to the early days....They have this deep feeling for their area, for their community and belonging. They will do anything for anybody, as long as you are here, as long as you are in the community....I'm an outsider, my mother-in-law calls me an outsider. I came in here, and I'm changing things, which is the way outsiders do....But I think after five years I've mellowed out, and I have the same feeling that my husband does. I wouldn't leave here either.

Remarks like these sprinkle our interviews. There is a sense in which they should be taken at face value: Life is good if people think it so. Most are satisfied with their community, its institutions, their neighbors, and themselves. Certainly when they compared their circumstances with those of their urban-dwelling fellow citizens, they conveyed no sense of envy. Quite the reverse.

Yet, when we probed further, this sense of satisfaction was not uniform across all respondents nor all aspects of their towns. This was especially true when they spoke of their schools, but we will defer our discussion of that topic for a moment.

In every locality, the economy presented problems. The root of these problems was perceived to be the gradual drain of business and industry out of the community. As nearly as we can tell from the data we have at hand, these perceptions were accurate. In some cases this was attributed to the general decline of the family farm, and particularly to the current "farm crisis." The closing of farm implement stores, auto dealerships, and grocery stores was said to be the result. In other instances the failure or departure of firms was said to be a consequence of foreign competition or a buy-out and subsequent relocation of a local concern by a national corporation. Whatever the cause, it was clear that each village was in some economic difficulty.

This difficulty manifested itself in numerous ways. Perhaps the most obvious was a generally high level of unemployment. In every case it was higher than the State average. With money in short supply, concern about taxes, especially school taxes, is understandable.

The state of the local economies also had less obvious consequences. One of these was the lack of local jobs for high school graduates and the unwillingness of those who had left for college to return. The net result has been a drain of youth out of these villages to areas that offer greater economic opportunities. This has contributed to the decline in school-age children noted in each of our case studies and a proportionate increase in older, fixed-income families. Both phenomena have important implications for the schools. Although it is popular today to speak of the migration of people to rural areas, we found little evidence of it in these villages.

Still another consequence of these economic woes is that teachers are among the highest-paid individuals in these communities. In broader perspective, of course, teachers may argue that they are underpaid relative to others with similar training.[1] Whatever the merits of that argument, it is difficult to convince those on fixed incomes, the out-of-work, and the marginally employed that this is the case. Here is a former board member recalling his experience negotiating teacher contracts:

> I was on the negotiating committee several years and it was hard. Now again, you must keep in mind the type of area we're in. One member of the board now, as an example, he runs a sawmill, and people are drawing three, four, and five dollars an hour. And then you start talking $18-20,000 for a teacher that works nine months of the year, from eight in the morning until three in the afternoon, and they resent it.

In one community we studied, the striking teachers' association threatened an economic boycott of local businesses to back up their demands for a higher salary. In retaliation, the editor of the local paper (and member of the taxpayers' association) published the name and salary of every teacher in the district. The strike was broken. As a board member recalls: "In the end the teachers got zero pay increases, lost a sizable chunk of sabbatic benefits, and no longer received a salary bonus for graduate credits." As we shall see, however, such actions are problematic; they may make recruiting qualified teachers even more difficult than it already is.

Teacher income is affected in yet another way by the lack of economic opportunity in the towns we studied. It is commonplace for teachers, especially beginners with families, to supplement their salaries with part-time employment. That strategy is difficult to implement under the conditions we are describing.

One final economic aspect of these villages and their schools concerns the latter's contribution to the former. That is, it is usual to consider the capacity of a community to support its schools—its wealth, tax rate, etc. But we should also remember that a school contributes to a community's economy through money it expends that has been derived from State and federal sources. We have no way to estimate that contribution in this study, since we do not know what portion of our schools' expenditures are made locally. However, certainly much of it is, primarily through salaries and wages and the purchase of supplies and materials. Those expenditures are likely to be a significant contribution to the local economy. The loss of a school is apt to be a significant blow to that economy, especially if it is already depressed.

Not all problems are economic in nature, however. One recurrent theme we heard, especially from students, concerned the lack of leisure activities for youth. One of our interviewees described the choices available to students in his community as watching television and drinking. In the words of a high school senior there, students:

> ...stay home and watch movies, VCR movies. That's it. End of excitement. We hang out at the beach, hang out at the corners, go to other people's houses and have parties....There's no movie theatre....In the winter they have a skating rink, but that's mostly for little kids. There's really nothing to do except in the summer when you go to the beach, and then you just have a massive party. Teachers tended to agree with this assessment, but did not limit it to the town's youth:

> That's the community social life, in the pubs, and that's where the kids grow up from a very early age, that's what they do to have a good time. You go out drinking.

> A lot of these homes do not get magazines, they do not get newspapers, and I doubt very much if they ever see a parent sit down and read a book....It is important that you listen to good TV, not just garbage.

Against such assessments, however, it is also true that by and large these communities (and their schools) seem to go to extraordinary lengths to provide leisure time activities for residents. We were impressed by the apparently heavy use school buildings received in the afternoons and evenings. Most often these uses tended to be athletic in nature, but they were by no means restricted to sports. Music events, plays, and meetings of various citizens' groups, for example, were also common. One guidance counselor complained:

> I'll tell you, there's an athletic event or something going on every evening. It took me three weeks until I could find an open night to hold a financial aid information meeting for parents.

Another problem of these towns was alluded to often. We frequently heard the expression (usually in the context of a discussion of reorganizations or school closings) that "the school is the center of this community." We are not entirely sure what people meant by this, but it seems obvious that one meaning was simply that the school building was one of the few facilities in a village capable of housing any sizable event.

We think that the "school-as-center" theme derives not so much from the fact that buildings are used heavily, but from the fact that the school is one of the few institutions remaining in these places. We have already noted the deterioration of these villages' economic functions. As a consequence, people drive, sometimes lengthy distances, to work in neighboring small cities. But other institutions have been lost as well. Shopping is no longer done locally. Both adolescents and adults find much of their leisure activities away from the village in which they live. Social services and governmental offices are located elsewhere.

These villages have experienced a kind of reverse suburbanization. After World War II many people lamented the suburbs that sprouted like mushrooms around American cities as "bedroom communities." These places were not communities at all; they lacked the institutions that tie people together. Since then, many suburbs have developed their own institutions; they have become larger versions of what these villages once were. During this same period, some of the villages we studied have become 1940s-style suburbs—rural bedrooms for nearby small cities. Aside from the church, perhaps, schools are the last local institution in some of these places.

"Institution" is simply a shorthand way of describing a stable pattern in the web of social life that binds individuals together. It is what makes a community something more than an aggregation of people. Thus, the loss of a school in these villages is potentially more damaging than it would be in other, more institutionally rich locales. We suspect that this is what the following two people meant when they spoke to us about their schools. The first is a highly experienced teacher in Ellison; the second a parent from Arcadia:

> From being here 28 years, I don't know whether this would be true in all rural areas, but here the school really makes the community. Take the school out...and you don't have much left here....It is the core...the heart of the community.
>
> The school is very much a part of the life of the community....I think if something were to happen to our school, for whatever reason, it would be a really devastating blow....The school is for your children, and your children are your life.

The dilemma, then, is the very centrality of the schools in the lives of these villages. Many believe that, regardless of how important these schools are to the social fabric, they cannot provide an adequate education to students. They require, it is argued, a major administrative reorganization. They require closing. But to close the one remaining institution in a small village—even if it is an ineffective and inefficient institution—is to do that village serious damage. Indeed, some residents will view it as a hostile act. As we shall see when we describe attempts to close schools, community resistance can be fierce.

THE SCHOOLS

If there are problems in the communities we studied, there is no shortage of concerns about the schools. In this section we discuss the more salient of these concerns. We have divided them into four topics: programs, teaching in small schools, students, and administrative leadership.

Programs

Perhaps the most discussed problem of small schools is their difficulty in offering adequate programs to their students. When we talked with the teachers, administrators, pupils, and parents this turned out to be not a problem but a cluster of problems. In this section we will discuss what we learned from our case studies about program offerings. In Chapter 4, we discuss the results of our statistical analyses of statewide data on curricular offerings.

Program difficulties come in various guises. Sometimes they are simply a matter of financial constraints. In one of our sites, for example, the district was attempting to operate its high school science program without much of the apparatus found in any reasonably equipped science laboratory. The physics teacher commented as follows:

> Look around this room. I have virtually no equipment. When I came last year I had none. Apparently it's been a complete textbook-type of course. Whatever labs they had been doing were very minimal.... When I wanted to run a physics lab, I didn't have any materials and it created a real problem to do a demonstration in the classroom. I do not have a computer here. To teach with a computer would be a tremendous asset, but [getting one] would take almost our entire budget. We'll try again next year to get a computer, but we do have that problem, lack of equipment and lack of funds.

People in other districts made similar comments about the adequacy of buildings for instruction, the school library, athletic equipment, and musical instruments, to name but a few areas of concern. For those making such comments, the quality of their programs was adversely affected because necessary facilities were unavailable. Although a school might have all of the courses required by the State, if it is unable to provide the implements of instruction, its programs were judged inadequate.

Further, we quickly discovered that it was misguided to think of the quality of a school's program as if it were a single thing. Quality often varied widely within the same school, depending on the subject or level under consideration. In one district we studied, for example, three programs were exemplary. The first, in science, was notable because, in a district with a total K-12 population of only 187 students, a range of Regents and non-Regents courses was offered. The second, the special education program, stood out for the manner in which handicapped pupils had been successfully integrated into the regular classrooms and extracurricular offerings. Concerning it, a recent State Education Department evaluation concluded:

> The district has every reason to be proud of their special education program and the accomplishments of students classified as having a handicapping condition....The attitude of those members of the staff who were interviewed by this regional associate was exemplary. Finally, the district's computer program was notable because of the diverse way these machines were used in classrooms at every grade level.

But if this school system has at least three outstanding programs, it is also fair to say that it has at least two that are totally inadequate: art and home economics. At present secondary students receive no instruction in either area.

We single out this district because it illustrates what we found in all of these small rural schools—wide variation in the adequacy of programs. Even in the district that we selected because it was said to be an example of everything that is wrong with small schools, we found three-year sequences in two foreign languages, a non-Regents biology course, and physics and chemistry offered every year—all highly unusual in schools of its size.

Size alone, we also learned, was not a terribly good predictor of program diversity, even within the restricted range of our sample. It was true that the larger schools tended to have wider offerings than the smaller ones. For example, comparing New Hope and Arcadia, two districts similar in many respects except size, our associate noted more program offerings in the larger. However, the bigger districts were not immune to difficulties. Yorkville, a veritable giant in our sample, had the greatest variety of programs, but it too had difficulty meeting the needs of students unable to take courses in the normal sequence.

This lack of uniformity—no district was consistently good or poor in its offerings—suggests that the quality of a school's programs may be less related to its size than to idiosyncratic factors such as the presence of a particularly effective and committed teacher or administrator. We shall have more to say about these matters.

A frequently cited deficiency of small schools concerns the problem of teachers covering a number of different subjects, sometimes outside of their areas of certification. Leaving aside the latter issue for a moment, when, for example, a mathematics teacher must teach all of the courses in the math program—Regents and non-Regents, algebra, geometry, etc.—the teacher is spread too thinly, has too many preparations each day, and is unable to develop specialized skills in a particular subject. As a consequence, pupil learning suffers.

We found ample evidence of this "thin spread" in the smallest districts we studied. For example, comparing New Hope with its smaller neighbor, Arcadia, about 45 percent of the teachers in the latter district had four or more preparations each day, while only 20 percent of their colleagues in New Hope were assigned a load that heavy.

But percentages do not give the flavor of what is involved here—the price teachers sometimes pay to provide an adequate curriculum to their charges. Although the following quotation is lengthy, it vividly indicates the almost frantic consequences of trying to provide for individual needs in some of these small schools. Here is a science teacher describing, period by period, his school day:

> A typical day starts off, I teach an introductory computer-literacy course for eighth graders. We're on a half-year cycle. I get half the class for the first half of the year and half the second. The boys and girls are split in gym class, so I see them twice a week. At the same time, I have another student who's picking up a one-credit computer course. She's a senior, so it means I'm teaching two classes at once the first period.

> During the second period, I'm teaching a Regents physics course in the science room, plus I have an independent Pascal senior student over here in the computer room at the same time.
>
> During the third period, I'm doing coordination work with the elementary school and I'm also up here working with BOCES through the telecommunications project. So I'm basically doing computer work third period—my off period.
>
> Fourth period I'm in the computer room teaching junior and senior, one-credit and one-half-credit computer courses. We're having both classes going at once. The one-half-credit students are supposed to be halfway behind the full-credit students. That alternates on different days, but I see most of them five days a week.
>
> Fifth period I'm teaching Regents biology across the hall in the science room. That period I don't have anybody else.
>
> Sixth period I teach a senior, one-credit computer course. I see them every day of the week.
>
> Seventh period depends on the day. I have two separate physics labs that meet. Regents physics twice a week—a Monday-Wednesday lab group and a Tuesday-Thursday lab group. And on Friday I have a Regents biology lab.
>
> Eighth period is another free period. I'm either here or at the elementary school, because the second half of the year I'll be teaching fourth and fifth graders introduction to computers. Or else I'm up here doing computer coordination or trying to set up stuff for my science class.

As our associate notes, as hectic as that schedule is, it was actually worse in the past. The same teacher:

> I did all of the sciences right up until last year. Last year it was a bit of a circus. I taught (grades) 7-12 science, plus three computer courses. At one point I had three things going on in the same period: biology, advanced computer and introductory computer.

Obviously, we have no way of assessing the quality of this person's teaching. We would hazard a guess, however, that it is not much improved by his district permitting (or requiring) him to teach this sort of schedule.

The "out-of-certification" issue is a problem in these small districts. Sometimes their small size forces them to offer State mandated courses taught by unqualified instructors. The teacher quoted above alluded to this matter in his comment about teaching physics. That person described his educational background and credentials as follows:

> Because I majored in biology and minored in chemistry, I have permanent certification in biology, chemistry and general science 7-12. I can also teach physics as my one out-of-certification area, and the computer [courses] require no certification because the State has nothing for it yet.

In regard to teaching outside one's area of certification, things may be even worse than they appear in these schools. The reader should keep in mind the minimal State requirements for certification in a high school subject area. In science, for example, a person with as few as 15 hours in chemistry can be certified to teach it. That is far below what most colleges and universities demand of a liberal arts student majoring in chemistry. (And it is probably far below what most employers would expect in a freshly-minted chemistry major.) Thus, not only is this teacher instructing outside of his area of competence when he teaches physics, he may well be teaching biology and chemistry (in which he is certified) with the barest minimum of training in those subjects. Clearly this is not the fault of the teacher or the district; it is a problem in New York State's teacher certification standards. And of course, even if one equates subject matter competence with certification, there is no way to be sure that this teacher (or any other) is competent to "teach computers"—whatever that might mean.

In the district's defense on this matter of schedules, it should be noted that it has added a second science teacher to its staff. This was in response to the Regents Action Plan. One of our respondents candidly said that without the pressure of the Regents Action Plan, the school system would have continued to allow this teacher to instruct "10 or so preps a day."

The conditions in the district illustrated by its science program have not gone unnoticed by State officials. One of these had this to say about the district:

> I'm not sure they believe it, but they offer a very inadequate program. It's a district that is really very entrenched provincially. I don't see any way that they're going to meet the Regents Action Plan requirements. They don't have the money to do it. I don't even think they have the support. They're in this very interesting position of not being willing to do anything about it, but they are not able to meet the requirements. I don't know what's going to happen. How long they will be able to survive and not be called to task for not meeting the regulations, I don't know. For the small districts of New York State, reorganization is the only route they have. They keep looking for straws, but they've got too many deficiencies.

This matter is not simply one of teachers in small schools having to prepare for too many different classes each day, of their being unable to develop the expertise attainable when a narrower range of courses is required of them, or of individuals teaching outside their areas of certification. It spills over into the important process of curriculum preparation, and it is further exacerbated for new teachers when adequate curricular guides are not available. A science teacher recalls his novice year:

> The person ahead of me must have done his masters in Education on science textbooks, or something, because when I walked in the door there was just a ton of textbooks, and the principal pointed to them and said, "There you go!"...and that was my curriculum guide. For the first couple of years I was in the school system I developed a curriculum with objectives and all that. Later I became concerned with sequencing my courses. I teach Regents Earth Science, ninth grade General Science, tenth grade General Science and seventh grade Life Science. I tried to get help from the State Education Department. They were no help at all, so I did it myself.

As anyone who has engaged in the process knows, preparing a good curriculum is time consuming and requires a high level of expertise. In larger school systems it is usually carried out by a departmental committee of teachers representing the subject matter concerned. However, in small schools a "department" often consists of one person, and hence the task of curriculum development falls to him or her. As one of our associates has written about one district in our sample:

> The issue of curriculum development was an important one to the teachers. We found, in an informal survey, that over 70 percent of the teachers were not satisfied with the procedures for developing, maintaining, and determining school curriculum. Further, writing a curriculum guide is time consuming....A social studies teacher (Regents) says that "it usually takes me about five years to get a course rolling along so that I'm not doing massive hours of work at home..."

This may be especially important in small schools facing a problem of teacher retention. In these schools, where salaries are lower, "massive hours of work at home" is a recipe for "burnout" and a short tenure in the position. Perhaps this is especially the case when the teacher is a dedicated novice. Moreover, as our associate notes, it effectively reduces a teacher's salary and leisure time and forecloses the possibility of supplementing family income with outside employment—when that is even possible in these small towns.

Still another problem frequently arises in the programs of these small schools. Because teachers are spread so thinly, both core courses and electives must often be offered in alternate years. Here is an industrial arts teacher on this topic:

> If I had another technology teacher here, I could teach nine or ten different subject matters or areas of technology....I have to go to an every-other-year basis, and offer photography every other year, offer advanced woodworking every other year, mechanical drawing ever other year, electronics every other year. You know, we have that type of a standoff going back and forth. English, the business classes, everything. Every subject area goes into that kind of pattern.

This alternate-year pattern creates difficulties for students' schedules if they somehow get out of phase with the offerings. For example, a ninth grader who fails Regents biology and needs to take it over must wait for two years to do so. At that point it is almost certain that the course will not fit into the schedule of an eleventh grader.

At least one good thing results from one- or two-person departments. Curriculum articulation problems virtually disappear. In one district, for example, there are two half-time English teachers, each responsible for three grade levels, and there is only one section at each grade. Hence, the person who instructs tenth grade knows that her students all had the same teacher (herself or her colleague) in ninth grade.

The problem of providing the array of courses necessary to meet State standards is critical in small schools. It has been a key concern of the State. An official of the State, who was on the scene during the attempt to reorganize

Arcadia and New Hope, notes that while the State traditionally has been reluctant to interfere with local schools,

> ...it does so when the local level does not meet the needs of its people. Such has been the case with handicapped students.

According to this person, Arcadia and New Hope were especially deficient:

> Each district needs to do something about its facilities, and improved educational opportunities are desperately needed at both districts. Assertions such as this, published in the local paper, provoked a strong reaction from residents; "The State had better prove that the curriculum is substandard before they try to force consolidation down our throats," wrote one in response.

This problem—whether the programs of these schools are deficient—provoked one of the subsidiary studies to this report. The State officials quoted above regarding Applegate, New Hope, and Arcadia are of the opinion that these districts are not providing adequate programs.[2] Clearly, what is behind these opinions is the notion that large districts can offer a greater variety of programs than small ones. That is why, in the words of the State official, "For the small districts of New York State, reorganization is the only route they have."

But to say that large districts can offer more programs is not particularly helpful. It is especially unhelpful in the context of school district reorganization. Just how large should the State encourage school systems to be? Is the process linear? That is, as districts get bigger does program diversity continue to grow? Questions like these provoked our statistical study of school size and curricular comprehensiveness discussed in the following chapter.

Teaching in Small Schools

If our case studies suggest that very small schools have serious problems when they try to offer a comprehensive program, the evidence is much less one-sided when the work of teachers is considered. To be sure, none of our respondents claimed that teaching in any of these districts was idyllic; it is difficult work under the best of conditions, and such conditions did not exist in the schools we visited. On the other hand, the teachers we spoke to found much that was good about their professional lives.

It will be useful to paint a statistical portrait of the teachers in these small schools. Almost all are white, and there are more females than males. They are mostly middle-aged and have taught in their current district for more than a decade, with little or no experience elsewhere.[3] Typically, they are married and their spouses work, sometimes in nearby towns and occasionally as teachers. All have their B.A. degrees, and most have taken a substantial number of graduate credits. Considerably less than half have an M.A. degree. Almost all took their undergraduate degrees at a State college in New York, and did their graduate work part-time at nearby institutions. Many grew up within one hundred miles of their current address.

Talking to these teachers, it became clear that students are at the core of their conceptions of their work. This should not surprise us; students can make a teacher's work either rewarding or hellish. It is natural, then, that when we asked what it was like to teach in their community, most spoke first about their pupils. Of the student-related issues, one—discipline—was at the forefront of their concern. The following remark is typical of many we heard and at the same time is especially informative, for it comes from a person with experience in an urban school system who was asked to compare the two situations:

> [The] biggest difference has to do with the attitude of the students. At Arcadia the students are so friendly. We have our small problems, but most of the time the students are easy to get along with....That makes all the difference in my job. My experience in New Jersey was never so easy. The discipline problem and the attitudes of the students were a constant source of irritation.

The teachers in our sample frequently expressed sentiments such as these. Sometimes this freedom from serious discipline problems was attributed to the nature of small-town living, its lack of the social pathologies that characterize our urban centers.[4] At other times it was attributed to the small size of the schools. In Hamlet, for example, teachers remarked that with so few students, individual teachers can deal quickly with problems as they arise. If a student is wandering the halls, someone will notice. With only one daily serving in the cafeteria and with the teachers eating together at one table in the corner, disturbances can be dealt with immediately.

Some argue that the informal teacher-pupil contacts in small communities are beneficial and contribute to the lack of discipline problems. That is, the quality, frequency and setting of contacts are different. Here is one high school senior on this subject:

> I think that being in a small school you have more attention and you know that the teachers care....The teachers, we have them over and over again, so you get to know them and they know what to expect and stuff....They try to be friends with you outside of school too. They come to see you in the sports, they come to your concerts and, you know, just the extra activities that you do, and they ask about them too. I am involved with the teachers a lot because I babysit for some. They are more like friends to you. My student council adviser was my social studies teacher, and she was just like my mom, you know. I could always go to her whenever I needed anything.

Lest this comment lead to the view that student-teacher relations in this village are unblemished, the same student goes on to say:

> They have an idea like they know who you are; and so when something is bothering you or whatever, they always bug you, they always ask what is wrong. And sometimes you just don't want to talk about it. And that's what I don't like about it; they can always tell.

Teachers also claimed that they get to know their charges better in these small towns and that doing so improves the quality of their work. This "We get to know them" theme was perhaps the most-cited advantage to teaching in these communities. A teacher:

> You know when not to get on their backs, you know their families, you know when things aren't going very well at home. You always know how to make them work. You know when to give them a hard time.

We suspect that teachers and pupils do get to know each other better in small schools, but we are dubious of the idealized view expressed in the preceding quotes—of close-knit communities where families and teachers live together and see each other regularly in the supermarket, their homes, etc. Many of these teachers do not live in the villages where they teach. Like parents, they commute, sometimes long distances, to work. Rather, we suspect that the better knowledge teachers claim to have is simply a result of having the same students year after year in their classrooms. When one teacher covers every course in a subject area, familiarity is inevitable. A high school teacher remarked:

> In social studies, for example, if the student comes in at the seventh-grade level, they are going to have that social studies teacher until that teacher either leaves or until they graduate...

We saw no evidence that this familiarity breeds contempt. But its other disadvantages are obvious. Consider, for example these three comments. First, a high school teacher:

> The brighter kids and I never have any problem. It's the ones that don't really care about being in class, which happens in seventh and eighth grade, so when they get to ninth grade, they take general math rather than algebra, so I'm done with them after eighth grade.

One wonders about the hapless seventh grader who gets tagged by this teacher, perhaps mistakenly, as "not bright" or "not caring." Next, consider this parent's terse lament:

> He ruined five of my kids. They just went right downhill.

And finally, a board member's thoughtful comment:

> The English teacher is their English teacher for four years. They become a protégé of that teacher. They can wind up really heavy into literature but very weak in grammar.

The dilemma is obvious. If teachers have greater opportunity to know their students in these small towns, they should be better able to gear their instruction to the particular pupils in their classrooms. But they also have greater opportunity to err—and there is greater opportunity for those errors to be calamitous. The outcome of this dilemma would seem to hang on the quality of the teachers these school systems are able to recruit and retain.

On the subject of recruitment, administrators were nearly unanimous that they had difficulty getting competent candidates for positions, especially in relatively specialized areas such as foreign languages, special education, chemistry, and physics. Part of this difficulty was attributed to isolation. (One superintendent spoke of "luring" novice teachers to his area.) Part was attributed to pay. It was frequently noted that salaries are too low (compared to those in other regions of the State) to attract the best candidates.

The isolation argument, while plausible, seems less persuasive than that regarding salaries. Most school systems in the State are beginning to experience a teacher shortage, especially in the specialized areas noted above.[5] That shortage is primarily a consequence of fewer people entering the profession. It seems more plausible to attribute some of the recruitment disadvantages our schools suffer to the sorts of teaching conditions discussed above rather than to their isolation. As one teacher sees it:

> If I were a first-year teacher I would quit. I would never go into teaching if I had to tackle seven subjects a year. I just couldn't handle it. I don't know how a new teacher could handle it coming into this school...and I would say it's pretty typical of small schools in our area.

Salary is almost certainly a significant part of the recruitment problem. There are substantial salary differences between very small rural school systems and the larger suburban and urban ones. Further, during the last decade this gap has been increasing. In a study comparing salaries in an upstate rural supervisory district with those in a downstate urban one, starting pay in 1974 was found to be $8,000 in the former and $11,000 in the latter—a difference of 38 percent. Ten years later these salaries stood at $12,800 and $19,200—a difference of 50 percent.[6] Although the costs of living are higher in the urban area, they are not half again as high.

Some residents have concluded that their districts get relatively poor quality teachers as a result of these differences:

> We're not exactly the best paying school district, so why should a teacher come out here to the boonies and work at low wage unless they were unable to get a better job at another? It is a sensible question.

Another frequently cited recruitment problem of these small districts is their inability to find teachers with dual certification. Because they start with a small number of students, the number requiring relatively specialized courses (e.g., a foreign language) is even smaller, which makes offering such courses prohibitively expensive. Thus, they need teachers only part-time for many subjects. A person certified in French and English would be a real asset in one of the school systems we studied. The district once had such a teacher, but she has left, and the superintendent has been unable to find another. Similarly, because he cannot find someone certified in art as well as another subject area, the district has no high school art program.

A shortage of qualified substitutes is also an acute problem in these districts (as well as elsewhere in New York State[7]). One teacher told us that it was easier to come in sick than to make up the missed work after having a "baby-sitter" in the classroom. This person claimed that as a consequence he had not taken a sick day in six years. Here is a mathematics teacher on this topic:

> When I'm absent they get a substitute in. But they never get subs that are math oriented, so it's pretty much a wasted day.

Finally, we must note that the shortage of qualified teachers is partly the State's doing. The recent enactment of the Regents Action Plan has, in effect, created an instant shortage in some subject areas, e.g., foreign languages. The effects of the Regents Action Plan, combined with those of the factors just discussed, have made it extremely difficult for the small schools of New York State to find qualified teachers. The State has, in our view, a responsibility to alleviate the problems it has begot.

On the subject of teacher retention, the evidence is more mixed. Clearly, some teachers have stayed, even when they did not intend to:

> I was originally looking to teach in a larger school district. I was starting my Master's when my mother called and said that this school wants you to come for an interview. I knew where the place was and I didn't send an application there and they wanted me to come. So I came, and it was like terrible salary and all that stuff. I figured, well, I can do it for a year.

That was 13 years ago.

Some superintendents claimed they were unable to hold their teachers, especially when those teachers were originally from outside the local area. In fact, one administrator said that he recruited "outsiders" only if he had no choice. This was not from some sort of local xenophobia, but from his experience with urban persons who simply could not adjust to rural life and soon left. Recall, however, that the typical teacher in these villages had more than ten years of experience. Thus, it is more accurate to say that districts may have trouble holding some of their recruits.

This aspect of the retention problem is especially troublesome. Just who leaves? Some of the administrators, teachers, and residents we spoke to had very clear views on this: The best leave. In fact, one board member said that as far as she was concerned, long tenure in her district was tantamount to proof of incompetence; those who were any good found higher-paying jobs within a few years. Coupling rural-urban salary differences to an "economic-man" perspective of teacher behavior suggests she may be correct.

But teachers do not always behave in an economically rational manner or consider only their own salaries when deciding whether to go or stay. We know, for example, that teachers are relatively immobile quasi-professionals.[8] This is partly a consequence of the feminization of the profession. The majority of teachers are women, most of whom have working husbands. Hence, moving to a higher paying position may not necessarily mean a net increase in total family income. A move to a neighboring district, i.e., one that would not uproot the spouse, is not likely to produce a large gain; contiguous school systems tend to keep their salary schedules in rough parity. Finally, tenure (which is not portable) and the unwillingness of new employers to grant full salary credit for experience tend to promote immobility. Here is an experienced male teacher who would like very much to move to a higher paying job but is acutely aware of the difficulties.

> There is absolutely no way I can go to another district. I mean I've been here 15 years. What am I going to do, jump to another district and start at the bottom of the pay scale? You know, when you're on the borderline [of economic survival], you can't trash three or four thousand dollars. You have to make every penny count.

It is quite another matter, however, whether this teacher and others like him can remain fully committed and enthusiastic in their work knowing that substantially higher wages are both available and unattainable. It is possible, then, that the best do not leave; they may grow discouraged and join the ranks of the mediocre. This may be at the root of the board member's comment noted above. But this is pure speculation on our part.

Class size may contribute to teacher retention. Walking the halls of secondary schools we often observed classes of 10 or fewer students. Classes of this size, which surely make the work easier, may offset the burden of an excessive number of preparations and contribute to teacher retention.

In summary, the evidence we could gather regarding teaching and teachers in small rural schools is mixed. In part, this is because a definitive study of those matters was not our purpose. However, a few things are relatively clear. There is a growing shortage of teachers in some specialties. Racially and ethnically, staff are homogeneous and very like the people in these villages. Blacks, for example, are rare. Similarly, teachers from distant or urban places, or teachers trained in other than New York State colleges are uncommon. These findings suggest that small rural schools are successfully recruiting from a relatively restricted pool, and that there may be a kind of parochialism about them that is particularly problematic, considering that pupils also lack a wide range of contacts with others not like themselves.

It is possible that the most talented teachers do not come to these districts and that the most talented of those that do come leave. We can neither prove nor disprove this belief. The relatively low salaries these districts pay and the heavy teaching loads they impose lend some credence to it. On the other side, the relative lack of discipline problems (a critically important matter to teachers) and their sometimes small classes tend to count against it.

Whatever the problems of teaching and teachers in small rural schools, one thing is quite clear, however. By and large those problems are rooted in the nature of the communities and the teachers they attract. They are not much affected by school district size. For example, if talented minority teachers find small rural school systems unattractive, large rural school systems are not likely to be more appealing to them.

On Being a Student in a Small School

We spoke to a wide variety of students in these schools, from the class valedictorians to those who were just managing to get by and who hoped, with a little luck, to graduate. In this section we discuss their views on the pleasures and pains of attending a small school. Before we turn to that, however, we need to say a few words about their academic achievement.

As we will discuss in the next chapter, the primary argument in favor of district reorganization is that small schools are unable to offer adequate programs. We have already seen that there is merit to this view, if one thinks of "adequate" as diverse. That is, these schools have difficulty offering anything beyond the essentials, and they have considerable difficulty offering those. However, diversity is not the only way to conceive of the adequacy of a district's offerings. It can also be measured by student achievement. If a school system's programs are inadequate, presumably students will not achieve as well as their counterparts in larger systems.

We collected data on the achievement levels of the students in these schools. Specifically, we examined PEP results from the elementary grades, the outcomes of the Regents tests, and scores of Competency Examinations. The students in these schools, overall, did as well as the State averages and in some cases considerably better. To be sure, there were instances where a particular grade level in one district fell below the State mean, but these were offset by higher results in other grades and subjects. Even the district reputed to be one of the most inadequate in New York State did not appear so when objective achievement data were considered.

We do not want to make too much of these findings. Sometimes very few students took an examination, and therefore averages are highly unstable. Further, these school systems were not chosen at random. Hence, our findings cannot be generalized to all small rural schools in the State. (In the next chapter, however, we will analyze statewide statistics for small districts.) In any case, whatever program inadequacies these districts manifest, those inadequacies did not translate into lower achievement test results.

But the quality of students' lives is not measured by test scores. When we turn to other, more qualitative aspects, we can further understand the effects of small schools on students.

We were often told that these pupils have rather low aspirations and that few plan to go to college. This seemed to vary among the districts we sampled. In one, for example, the proportion going on to college has hovered around 20 or 25 percent. In another, that proportion has been consistently more than 50 percent.

The explanation of this variation is unclear. In part it appears to be related to the educational levels of parents. Recall that these communities are economically depressed areas, with considerable unemployment. They are also "educationally depressed," in the sense that relatively few parents have been to college. Other research has consistently demonstrated a moderate correlation between the educational levels of parents and that obtained by their children,[9] and this might be the cause.

Certainly the educators we spoke to tended to attribute lower achievement and aspirations to the home. A teacher:

> It's difficult to try and convince a kid to stay in school until he's 20 so he can get a diploma, when the student says "What for? I'm going to work in the woods," or "I'm going to work at the mills, so what do I need a diploma for?"

Some parents also attributed low aspirations to students' home background:

> A lot of these kids, they see their parents living on welfare, they think cleaning the town hall lobby is the only option that they feel is available to live here.

There may also be a problem for students who do go to college. Some of our respondents thought that too many were dropping out. A guidance counselor blamed this on the adjustment pupils face coming out of a small high school and going into a relatively large and impersonal college:

> Well, the town and the school being small, we try not to have them go to large schools. Now if they insist on going to a place as large as Albany State, we let them go after consulting with their parents that there are 15,000 or more students. It's really too big for most students to handle the first year. We try to steer them into a smaller four-year or two-year school....They do not function well going to a large school....They just are used to 10 or 12 in a class, sometimes less, and when they get in those big schools with 100 or 200 in a class, they are lost. They can't talk to the teacher, and it's very hard....I would try to

> get a similar program that they wanted in a smaller school and say, "Well, it's your choice," but I would prefer that they start at a smaller school and then either transfer, graduate, or go on from there.

This person deliberately steers graduating seniors to small colleges or two-year institutions, at least to start their tertiary schooling.

On the other hand, not everyone blamed college dropouts on parents or school size. Consider this explanation offered by a high school senior:

> A lot of people come out of our school as the valedictorian, salutatorian, and when they get into college they just can't make it because the teachers here really aren't strict enough. I mean, we think they're really hard on us, but like a couple of years ago, both the salutatorian and the valedictorian of their class ended up quitting college before they finished their first half-year, because it was too much for them to handle....Back here they got excellent grades, they were two of the smartest girls that ever graduated from this school, but they couldn't survive. Their grades were like D's, and back here they were excellent. And that's happened to a lot of classes. I guess back here we think they're really hard on us, but I don't know if they prepare us all that well for college.

Regardless of whether (and why) students drop out of college, it is clear that an unusually large proportion who do go on to higher education attend two-year institutions in the State. In our survey of students we found few who said they were going to a public four-year institution, and the number considering private or out-of-state schools was minuscule. In this sense their educational aspirations are unduly limited. In these times of shrinking enrollments, it is not difficult to be admitted to a four-year college. Many, perhaps most, of the graduates in our sample would be admitted, we suspect. Further, there is good evidence that two-year colleges have substantially higher dropout rates than four-year institutions and that this is particularly true for students from relatively poor backgrounds, such as many students in our sample.[10] Thus, the counselor quoted above, who deliberately encourages pupils to go to two-year colleges, is probably exacerbating the very situation he is attempting to alleviate.

Perhaps another cause of the seemingly low educational aspirations of the students in these small schools is that they are generally ignored by college recruiters. Possibly because of their size, it makes little sense for large, academically oriented colleges and universities to actively recruit in them. This fact makes the quality of the guidance services provided by the high schools crucial.

If curricular diversity, the low educational levels of parents, and a lack of knowledge about opportunities make college going especially problematic in these small schools, it is also true that students have many more opportunities to participate in extracurricular activities than their counterparts in larger institutions. This is a consequence of the large number of these activities offered and the small numbers of students available to staff them. As Barker and Gump[11] demonstrated long ago, small schools offer fewer sports, clubs, etc., than large ones, but the differences are not at all proportional to their size. Small schools offer nearly as much as large ones.

Here is a partial list of the activities sponsored by a district of 408 students (K-12) that we studied.

- Baseball
- Track (boys and girls)
- Basketball (boys and girls)
- Varsity Cheerleading
- Cross Country
- Choir
- Jazz Club
- Concert Band
- Elementary Chorus
- Yearbook
- National Honor Society
- "Brain Game"
- Computer Club
- Ceramics Club
- Softball
- Soccer (boys and girls)
- JV Basketball
- JV Cheerleading
- JHS Basketball
- Pep Band
- Music Association
- Junior Band
- Color Guard
- Student Council
- Jr. National Honor Society
- Language Club
- Ski Club
- Photography Club

This number of activities creates a positive pressure for students to participate in one or more of them. If a student does not excel academically, there are many endeavors wherein he or she might stand out. They provide students with more chances to develop their leadership skills than are available in a larger institution. This advantage of small schools was noted often. Here, for example, is a teacher's remark on this matter:

> From my point of view the kids get to do a lot more here. The average kids can do all of the things here. They will be on the sports teams. They will be on the yearbook. They will be in the plays. They will be in the band. They will be in the chorus. They are in everything.

We view the increased chances for students to be involved in extracurricular activities as a very important advantage of small schools. These chances are not, however, an unmitigated blessing. One of our associates observed that a district he studied has had to dissolve its nine-man football team because of an insufficient number of players, and that:

> [Some] parents expressed relief that youngsters would no longer be coerced into going out for a team for which they were physically unprepared. The limited student body meant that anyone who went out for football was on the team. And in some years, before the team was dissolved, if there were not a sufficient number of athletes, pressure would be brought to bear on those youngsters who had not tried out.

We suspect that one important consequence of the pressure to participate in numerous activities is the lack of social cleavages so commonly found in larger schools. We saw little evidence of student cliques and their attendant frictions—the "jocks," "grinds," "greasers," and "druggies"—that are evident in larger high schools. Nor did we see much social class discrimination among students. Occasionally, references were made to "farmers," but these too seemed relatively innocuous, as this student implies:

> It seems that the ones who are out of town are usually farmers; not usually , but some of them are. I used to think, "Well, you know, they are probably a farmer's child and they're going to be put down and stuff," but a lot of times the farmers' children are the most popular. I

> don't know why, but I think that it mainly depends on the person and if they are likable or not. I don't think there is a lot of class discrimination, besides what every school has.

In our judgment there is little such discrimination in these schools. But if these districts try to provide nearly as many activities for their students as do larger, more urban ones, they cannot, in the end, make up for the cultural and social isolation pupils experience. Few students have had a black or Jewish classmate, for example. Few have been to an opera, ridden an airplane, or been in an art museum. Perhaps that is why one district goes to extraordinary lengths to sponsor a senior trip each year; students have travelled to London, Hawaii, Puerto Rico, the Virgin Islands, Mexico City, and Acapulco. But such trips, even if they were common in these schools, are unlikely to remedy the condition implied by this first-grade teacher's comment:

> The kids don't get to meet other people. Like this class, first grade—they're going to be second grade, third grade, fourth grade—they are going to move up through the school all together....As far as dating and stuff like that, these kids will have known each other forever!

Administrative Leadership

During the past decade a large number of studies have been carried out that, collectively, have been labeled "effective schools research." Essentially, the point of this work has been to try to identify the distinguishing characteristics of schools considered effective, characteristics that differentiate them from ineffective ones.

The findings of the effective schools research are remarkably consistent. Although this is not the place to go into all of these, one is especially pertinent. That finding concerns the behavior of principals. Rosenholtz provides a convenient summary.[12] Principals of effective schools establish clear organizational goals and communicate them to relevant persons; they involve their faculty in planning to reach those goals; they monitor the performance of both students and teachers; they protect teachers from disruptive events; they provide assistance as needed; and they recruit teachers who subscribe to school goals.

We were interested to learn whether the findings of this research could be applied to superintendents as well as to principals. Accordingly, we selected two districts that were nearly alike in all important respects except that one had a reputation for being exceptionally effective for a small district and the other did not. Our associate then conducted a careful examination of the workings of the two districts. He found that many of the same principal behaviors that contributed to making an elementary school outstanding were evident in the superintendent and contributed to making that district notable. The following paragraphs are based on Jacobson's summary of his observations.[13]

Ten years ago, a change in administration brought a superintendent to the district who had a very clear objective: to improve student performance. Faculty members were made aware that the superintendent saw their performance as critical to that improvement. Teacher performance was monitored and those not meeting expectations were denied tenure, pressured into retirement, or dismissed. At the same time, teachers were made aware that their efforts to improve student achievement would be "buffered" by the implementation of a code of student discipline that the administration enforced strictly.

Teachers were encouraged to experiment with the curriculum and to collaboratively address problems. Over time, teacher working conditions improved because there were fewer disciplinary problems. Subsequent gains in student achievement provided intrinsic payoffs that further reinforced teacher commitment to the district. When talking to teachers, we sensed their ongoing commitment to improvement as they discussed attempts to upgrade course offerings, available materials, facilities, and their own training.

It appeared to us that this superintendent had aggressively pursued his goal of improving student achievement, even at the risk of creating community opposition. In contrast, the neighboring superintendent was very sensitive to his community's "go-slow" attitude, particularly when it came to financial matters. The approach he has taken throughout his incumbency has been to add small increments to the district's budget rather than to push for major tax increases. When community residents and board members talk about this superintendent, they mention his fiscal efficiency first.

In contrast, although the first superintendent's skills in financial management were also praised, the positive impact he has had on the quality of the district's educational program was usually the first issue that residents, board members, and teachers mentioned. This difference in emphasis reflected the priorities of both the administrators and the communities themselves. The first superintendent's commitment to improved student achievement has been internalized by the community. Just as his faculty has come to believe that its efforts make a difference, the community has come to believe that continued improvement in student performance was the district norm. The community's willingness to finance a recent building referendum is one example of its commitment to this objective.

The role of the superintendent in a small rural district incorporates many of the responsibilities of a building principal in an urban district with the added one of providing direction for the district's educational program. If, as Rosenholtz suggests, a principal's commitment to a goal is a fundamental ingredient of successful schools in urban districts, then a superintendent's commitment plays no less of a function in rural schools. Indeed, the rural school superintendent is in the unique position of being able to mobilize not only his staff, but the community as well. Commitment cannot, in itself, overcome problems created by geography and inadequate finances. But if it results in greater teacher and community effort toward improving student performance, then rural schools are more likely to maximize their effectiveness.

Excellent administrative leadership may be in short supply in New York State's rural schools. Several of our respondents—teachers as well as community residents—claimed that good administrators moved on to better jobs in larger districts—"better" in the sense of greater responsibilities and higher salaries. We have no hard data to support or refute this notion, although administrators' salaries were certainly low in the districts we studied. It is an important issue which should receive further research. However, we were struck by the seemingly great variability in the leadership qualities among the chief school officers we met. Thus, we strongly suspect that, just as these districts may have difficulty holding on to capable teachers, they may also have difficulty retaining good administrators.

If our suspicions are correct, they have very important implications for New York State's small districts. We are convinced that the quality of administrative leadership was one of the most important determinants of program quality in the school systems we studied—certainly more important than mere size. If small size creates problems for these districts—and it does—those problems are likely to be substantially exacerbated or ameliorated by the quality of their superintendents.

CONCLUSIONS

We have presented our findings regarding the problems and virtues of small rural schools. In the process, we hope we have been able to separate some of the facts from some of the wishful thinking in the folklore of rural education. We found, for example, that in one sense these schools do fit Jefferson's ideal of a "common school," where the children of all the people come together to learn, and hence develop a mutual respect for one another. We saw also, however, that the "children of all the people" hardly represent the racial and ethnic diversity of the U.S. The "products" of these common schools often struck us as highly parochial. Similarly, while teachers almost certainly get to know their pupils better in these small schools, it is not typically because they rub elbows in the supermarket and drugstore, but because they meet each other in the classroom over and over—sometimes with ill effect. In the following paragraphs we will draw our principal findings together and state the more important of our conclusions.

First, many of the problems of these schools derive directly from the economic conditions of the communities in which they are found. With high levels of unemployed and marginally employed persons, financial resources are scarce and concerns about the perceived high costs of providing education are widespread. This has led some communities and their school boards to take extremely conservative fiscal positions toward their schools. This conservatism is most obvious in teachers' salaries, which are well below those offered in larger, more urban districts. The dilemma here is that although salaries are low, they are perceived, with justification, as being high relative to those earned by residents. More fundamentally, economic constraints have led a few of these districts to adopt a criterion of cost as the overriding consideration in educational decisions, with deleterious consequences for school facilities and programs.

Despite the financial strain that schools place on residents, these small communities put great weight on the importance of having their own school. Thus, they have an institution perceived by many as both essential and excessively burdensome. As we shall see, this is one reason why an opportunity to lessen that burden at the cost of losing the institution—i.e., school consolidation—is so politically divisive.

Two conclusions are central to our findings regarding the programs these schools offer. First, even the smallest of them offer programs which meet

State requirements, though sometimes barely. They do so, however, at substantial costs to their teachers, who are spread thinly, have too many lessons to prepare, and do not have the opportunity to develop expertise in teaching a few subjects. Second, the variation both within and among these small schools in the number and quality of programs is considerable. None of the districts we studied was uniformly deficient or exemplary.

There may be a serious shortage of qualified teachers in some subject areas, notably foreign languages, the sciences, and special education. There is also a shortage of persons qualified to teach more than one subject. These shortages are partly a consequence of the sharp decline in the number of prospective teachers being produced by colleges. They may also be a consequence of the isolation of these districts and the relatively heavy teaching burden they place on their secondary faculties. We think, however, that shortages are primarily a result of the low salaries they offer. There is some evidence that retaining qualified teachers is also a problem. Finally, some of the teacher shortage is a direct consequence of the State's action in adopting the Regent's Action Plan.

We conclude that students are learning, on average, as much as they would in larger schools. In some districts, however, educational and occupational aspirations are relatively low. Few students attend four-year colleges and universities. A significant advantage provided by the small schools we examined is the opportunity students have to participate in a wide variety of extracurricular activities. Our impressions are that these activities give students a chance to develop leadership ability as well as social and athletic skills. We shall have more to say about this matter in the next chapter.

Finally, the variation we observed in the number and quality of the programs offered by these schools is substantially a product of the variation in the leadership provided by their superintendents. On one hand, some superintendents seem to see their job as providing the educational services a community wants. If a community does not want much from its schools, that is what it gets. On the other hand, some superintendents seem to see their job as requiring them to educate their communities and boards about what they *should* want. They actively try to raise expectations and then attempt to insure that faculties and students meet them. Because of this factor alone, we suspect that whether a school district offers good programs or poor ones has less to do with its size than with the quality of its superintendent and board. We also consider this topic further in the following chapter, where we examine the State's response to the problems of small rural schools.

Notes

1. It is not clear, however, that even in broad perspective teachers are underpaid relative to those with similar training. See D.H. Monk and S.L. Jacobson, "Reforming Teacher Compensation." *Education and Urban Society* 17(2) (1985), pp. 223-236.
2. Lest the reader infer that only these three are so viewed, we should say that similar quotes from equivalent officials could be provided about most of the remaining districts in our study.
3. Our analyses of statewide data, reported in Chapter 4, suggest that these teacher characteristics are typical for small districts in New York State.
4. As we noted earlier, alcohol abuse was thought by some to be a serious problem in some areas. Apparently, however, if that is a problem, it is one confined to students' out-of- school hours.
5. For example, Rochester, one of the largest districts in the state, is experiencing shortages in precisely the same areas as the schools in our sample. See Emil J. Haller, *Rochester*, N.Y., Washington, D.C.: The Rand Corporation, 1986.
6. Stephen L. Jacobson, *Alternative Practices of Internal Salary Distribution and their Effects on Teacher Recruitment and Retention.* Unpublished Ph.D. dissertation: Cornell University, 1986.
7. See Haller, *Rochester*.
8. Dan C. Lortie, *Schoolteacher*. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1976).
9. For example, see Christopher Jencks *et al.* *Inequality*. (New York: Basic Books, 1972.)
10. See for example, Jerome Karabel, "Community Colleges and Social Stratification: Submerged Class Conflict in American Higher Education," *Harvard Educational Review*, 42 (November, 1972), pp. 521-562.
11. G. Barker and Paul V. Gump, *Big School, Small School*. (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1964).
12. S. J. Rosenholtz, "Effective Schools: Interpreting the Evidence," *American Journal of Education* (May, 1985), pp. 352-388. While Rosenholtz's work concerns inner city schools, entirely consistent findings concerning a broader variety of institutions can be found in Educational Research Service, *Effective Schools: A Summary of the Research* (Arlington, VA., 1983).
13. Stephen L. Jacobson, "Administrative Leadership and Effective Small-Rural Schools: A Comparative Case Study," (Ithaca, New York: Unpublished manuscript, Department of Education, Cornell University, 1986), pp. 81-84.

Chapter 4

The Folklore of Reorganization: Small Rural Schools and the State

In the last chapter we discussed some of the virtues as well as some of the problems that face small rural schools in New York State. We now turn our attention to the most common solution to these problems: district reorganization. As we have seen, some of the problems of the schools we studied are either caused or made worse by school size. Reorganization—the creation of a single, larger district from two or more small ones—is, therefore, a seemingly straightforward solution to these problems.

This solution has been used hundreds of times in New York State (and in most other states as well). In this chapter we examine the folklore of reorganization. What is the logic and evidence regarding this mechanism for solving the problems engendered by small size?

We have divided the Chapter into four sections. In the first we examine the State's position regarding district reorganization. Next, we review empirical evidence that bears on this position, paying particular attention to program quality and cost. In the third section we turn to the evidence derived from our case studies of districts that have experienced or attempted reorganization. Finally, we will present our conclusions concerning this strategy for alleviating the problems of small rural schools in New York State.

NEW YORK STATE AND SCHOOL DISTRICT REORGANIZATION

Arguments for the consolidation of small rural schools are of two general sorts: equity and efficiency. The equity argument centers on the notion of equal educational opportunity. If some children are denied a good education simply by virtue of having been born in rural areas and thereby having to attend small, inadequate schools, they have been denied equal educational opportunity. The efficiency argument centers on costs. It is said that small schools are unable to benefit from the economies of scale available to their larger counterparts. That is, it costs more to provide the same service in a small school than in a large one. Proponents of consolidation often conflate these two arguments. For example, the State claims: "Thus, the answer to better as well as more economical education is school district reorganization."[1]

If these arguments are correct, the State has an obligation to promote the consolidation of small districts. Fundamentally this is because education is a state function, not a local one. Hence, New York State is responsible for insuring that its children receive equal educational opportunity and that this opportunity is provided in an efficient manner.

It is incontrovertible that the State has concluded that these arguments are correct. Our evidence for this assertion is not simply the statements of the State officials whom we interviewed for our case studies. The retired and current District Superintendents surveyed for us also overwhelmingly

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subscribe to these notions. The author of that survey concludes that among these persons (who have been highly influential in promoting school reorganization) there is "100 percent or near agreement," that:

> Equality of opportunity has not nearly been reached in New York State, partly because of the spotty success in achieving needed centralization.

He further concludes that there is "majority support" for the proposition that:

> Legislative action should be taken to eliminate the grossly inadequate and/or inefficient districts which have no justifiable reason for existence.[2]

Nor is the evidence of a consensual view regarding the equity and efficiency arguments limited to SED officials and District Superintendents. It riddles the literature published by the State and the State Education Department regarding this topic. As just two examples, consider the following:

> By far the most important reason for eliminating the small school district and the small high schools in the State is the educational advantages now enjoyed only by the larger district. The small district simply cannot offer its pupils the variety and equality of opportunity which are essential to a top-quality educational process.[3]

> A careful review of the studies and data available indicates that the possibility of providing an adequate secondary educational program, a qualified staff of subject specialists, a suitable physical plant and sufficient financial resources all at reasonable cost to the taxpayer exists only with a secondary enrollment of more than 500 students.[4]

As a consequence of its convictions regarding equity and efficiency, the State has actively promoted school district reorganization for a number of years. The Master Plan of 1947 (revised in 1958) scheduled many school districts for reorganization, specifying precisely which were to be combined with which.[5]

Further, to encourage small districts to merge, the Legislature provided substantial financial incentives in the form of operating aid and building aid. Today, scheduled districts that agree to consolidate receive an increase equal to 20 percentage points of their normal operating aid for five years, decreasing by 2 percent each subsequent year until phased out. Districts wishing to engage in capital projects may receive an additional 30 percent of whatever state aid they would otherwise be entitled to were they not designated for centralization. On the other hand, districts scheduled for reorganization could not receive state money for capital expenditures unless the reorganization was carried out, or unless it could be shown that financial assistance would not impede reorganization. Thus, New York State has held out both a carrot and a stick to its small rural schools to encourage them to combine. Such incentives and disincentives can only be understood in terms of a fundamental conviction that small schools are both ineffective and inefficient.

These financial incentives are not trivial sums. In order for readers to grasp the amounts involved, consider the case of a school district that ordinarily would receive $4,000,000 each year from the State as operating aid. If that district were the result of a consolidation, it would receive an additional $800,000 each year for the first five years following its reorganization. After that, this, additional aid would decrease by 2 percent each year until the 14th year following the consolidation. In all, the district would receive $7,600,000 (in current dollars) from the State of New York solely because it had agreed to reorganize. If, in addition, the district decided to build a new high school facility for (say) $4,000,000 funded by 20-year bonds, it might expect to receive from New York State $1,575,000 more than it otherwise would have obtained over that period. Thus, the costs (to the taxpayers of New York) would have totaled over 9 million dollars.[6]

State law as well as the regulations and guidelines of the State Education Department spell out the procedures to be followed when two or more school districts consider centralization. It is necessary to understand these procedures to understand our discussion in this chapter. For that reason we will briefly sketch their salient points.[7]

1. The school boards involved must demonstrate a willingness and commitment to consider a merger. At minimum this requires that each pass a resolution to that effect.
2. Information bearing on the proposed merger must be collected. Normally this is done through a feasibility study that examines the proposal and its likely effects. District Superintendents play a key role in these studies. The actual research and preparation of a report to the boards involved is usually done by a consultant (who is often a former District Superintendent), sometimes with the help of committees composed of community residents. The Bureau of School District Reorganization, SED, participates in the design, conduct, and review of these studies.
3. After considering the results of the study, the boards must decide whether a merger should be further considered. If the decision is positive, a resolution to that effect is passed.
4. The results of the study and any additional information thought appropriate must be communicated to the residents of the districts.
5. An assessment of voter support must be conducted. Usually this is done with a petition from eligible voters to the Commissioner of Education. If the Commissioner judges the support to be strong enough, he will authorize a referendum on the issue.
6. A referendum is held. Ballots from each district are first combined and then counted. If the majority of those eligible and voting support the merger, a new school district is created by the Commissioner. Shortly thereafter, a board of education is elected by its residents. If a majority of the combined voters do not support the consolidation, it is defeated and the original districts remain intact.
7. The action of the Commissioner in creating the new district is final. Districts cannot be "demerged."

It is obvious that the Master Plan, the financial incentives, and these procedures have been successful inducements for getting many small school districts to combine. In Table 1 we show the number of school annexations and centralizations since 1958, when the revised Master Plan went into effect. Since that time, 235 school districts have been annexed or centralized.[8]

Table 1. School District Reorganization: 1958–1984

Year	*Type of Reorganization*		
	Annexations	*Centralizations*	*Total*
1958–1962	65	21	86
1963–1967	79	19	98
1968–1972	28	13	41
1973–1977	3	2	5
1978–1982	0	1	1
1983–1984	3	1	4
Totals	178	57	235

It is also obvious, however, that the number of reorganizations has drastically declined in the last decade. This decline is primarily a reflection of the fact that most of the reorganizations scheduled in the Master Plan have already occurred. Nevertheless, there are still school systems that have not agreed to mergers, though they were slated to do so in the Master Plan. (Some of these recalcitrant districts have been included among those we studied.) Their apparent reluctance has led some to suggest that the amount of operating and building incentive aid should be increased. In effect, proponents of this strategy are suggesting that, if the residents of some school districts are unwilling to merge, the State needs to "make them an offer they can't refuse."

We find much that is problematic about these incentives and procedures, as we shall make clear later in this chapter and in Chapter 6. For the moment, however, we wish to turn our attention to the rationale behind them—that is, to the equity and efficiency arguments themselves.

THE EVIDENCE ON PROGRAM QUALITY, COST, AND SCHOOL DISTRICT SIZE

Our case studies provide some evidence that small schools are simply less able to offer extensive programs than large ones. However, because of the small number of districts involved, and because of the restricted range of their size, we could reach no definitive answer regarding the effects of size on program quality. We wish to return to this question. Is it true that small schools are unable to offer programs equal in quality to those offered by larger ones?

The Equity Argument

There are many ways to think about "quality." We will consider three: student achievement, student social development, and curriculum comprehensiveness.

Student Achievement. One example of an important educational outcome is student learning. If New York State's small schools offer relatively low-quality programs, presumably the graduates of those programs will learn less than their counterparts from larger schools. There was ample evidence in our case studies of teachers being spread thinly across many subject areas, having an inordinately heavy number of preparations, and having to teach outside their areas of competence. Does student learning suffer as a consequence?

We will address this question by examining the results of New York State's mandated testing programs—the Pupil Evaluation Program (PEP); the Regents Competency Tests; and the Regents Examinations. We recognize that test scores do not measure everything of importance about program quality. Nevertheless, we believe that test results do provide one important indication of quality. If New York State's small schools are unable to provide their students with adequate programs, as the State claims, we should expect this deficiency to show up when we compare schools of different sizes. This is especially so because these tests are the State's own yardsticks of quality.

In Tables 2-5 we show the results of these tests for the 1983-84 school year.[9] School districts are divided according to size as follows: "Large cities" are Albany, Buffalo, Rochester, Syracuse, and Yonkers; "Medium cities" are Binghamton, Mount Vernon, New Rochelle, Niagara Falls, Schenectady, Troy, and Utica; "Small cities" are all city districts with populations below 50,000; Large central school districts ("Large central") are districts with enrollments over 2,500 and all village districts; Medium central school districts ("Medium central") are those with enrollments over 1,100 and below 2,500; Small central school districts ("Small central") are those with enrollments below 1,100.

Table 2 gives the PEP results for grade 3 reading and math, grade 5 writing, and grade 6 reading and math. The numbers in the table's cells are the percentage of students scoring above the State reference point—i.e., those making acceptable progress.

As one might expect, Table 2 shows that the very largest school systems in New York State have fewer students above the reference point than the smaller districts. But that is not the matter of interest since, even if the large cities had commanding leads in test results, no amount of reorganization is

Table 2. Statewide PEP Results by District Size (percent above State reference point in 1983-84)

District Size	*Reading (3)*	*Math (3)*	*Writing (5)*	*Reading (6)*	*Math (6)*
New York City	58.1	61.5	77.9	60.0	58.8
Large cities	69.0	76.8	81.2	66.2	72.5
Medium cities	77.7	85.1	85.7	75.9	78.7
Small cities	83.5	85.8	85.4	81.9	81.7
Large central	90.1	92.0	90.2	88.0	88.1
Medium central	89.4	91.0	88.7	86.1	86.1
Small central	87.3	89.0	88.4	87.8	87.7
State average	77.2	80.0	85.2	77.5	77.5

going to turn the small central school districts of New York State into Rochesters and Albanys. Instead, the reader should compare the percentages above the reference point of large, medium and small central school districts.

In general, these percentages tend to favor the larger central school districts, but they are of trivial magnitude. For example, in third grade reading 2.1 percent more of the pupils in medium-sized central school districts scored above the reference point than did those attending small central districts. Even if one assumes that *all* of this discrepancy is due to district size (a manifestly absurd assumption), these data do not support an argument that the quality of elementary programs in small school systems is markedly below those of larger ones.[10] One should also note that these small schools are well above the State averages.

In Table 3 we present the results of the Regents competency tests in mathematics, reading and writing given in January 1984. The numbers in the cells are the percentage of pupils who passed the test.

Table 3. Percent Passing Regents Competency Tests by District Size, 1983-84

District Size	*Mathematics*	*Reading*	*Writing*
New York City	51.7	88.5	73.0
Large cities	64.2	88.7	79.0
Medium cities	70.0	94.0	79.1
Small cities	69.3	97.2	82.0
Large central	72.3	96.8	85.6
Medium central	78.7	98.4	89.4
Small central	75.9	98.5	90.3
State average	59.1	93.2	80.3

Again, students from small schools score, on average, well above the State mean. If anything, the data in Table 3 would support the argument that the highest quality programs are to be found in the smallest school districts. In two of the three comparisons, the average student in the smallest districts outperformed his counterpart in all of the larger ones; in the third case the pupils in districts of 1,100 to 2,500 scored highest. Indeed, if the State accepted competency tests as an index of program quality (and hence of the need to reorganize), it should provide financial incentives for breaking up large districts, not merging together small ones.

Tables 2 and 3 are important because they both focus on what is often termed "the basics." Test results are arguably of greatest import here, since, if any significant number of students from small schools are unable to read, write, and calculate adequately, they are unlikely to become economically self-sufficient or politically competent citizens.

It might be argued that these tests of basic skills do not speak directly to the argument that small rural schools should reorganize. Such an argument usually is taken to mean that small schools do not have the resources to provide specialized, resource-intensive high school programs, especially in mathematics and the sciences. For that reason we turn, in Table 4, to the results of selected Regents' examinations given in 1984. The table gives the percentage of students who took at least one Regents examination in that year. This number is thought to be significant, since it measures the extent to which a school district encourages all pupils to take its more demanding courses. Under each subject heading is the percentage of students taking the exam who passed it.

In Table 4 we see that small school systems seem to place as high a proportion of their students in Regents courses as do larger ones. It would appear, then, that whatever difficulties these districts have in offering such courses, they do not attempt to deny students access to them. In Table 4 we also see the first instances of the smallest schools falling below the State mean on a test of achievement. In the cases of math 11, chemistry, and earth science the pupils in districts with fewer than 1,100 pupils did not do as well as the average student in New York State. This was not the case in the presumably less resource-intensive courses of English, social studies and French—subjects that do not require specialized laboratories, for example. Readers may recall the comments of the science teachers quoted in the last chapter, comments suggesting a lack of equipment, excessive preparations, etc. If those conditions are common among small schools, that might explain these results.

One should not make too much of these discrepancies, however. First, their magnitude is very small. Second, no equivalent discrepancy appears in the cases of biology and physics, both of which require specialized equipment and teachers with relatively scarce credentials.

We conclude that there is no persuasive evidence that the students of small rural schools are receiving a lower-quality education than students attending larger institutions, if one is willing to accept test scores as an indication of program worth. Note carefully, however, that this conclusion is derived from State-provided data that categorize small districts as those with enrollments below 1,100 pupils. That is certainly small, but it is considerably larger than most of the schools we visited. It is possible that the programs of the very smallest schools are deficient, but that these deficiencies are masked by our having to use the size categories provided by the State for these data.

Another kind of outcome measure of the quality of a school district's programs is educational attainment. Attainment is indicated by the percentage of pupils who graduate and the percentage of those who earn the more difficult-

Table 4. Regents Results in Selected Subjects

District Size	*Percent Taking Exams*	*English*	*Social Studies*	*French*	*Math 11*	*Biology*	*Chemistry*	*Earth Science*	*Physics*
New York City	47.6	69.2	57.4	87.4	68.3	46.8	61.4	46.0	70.7
Large cities	52.0	72.6	55.6	87.9	69.8	60.6	66.0	66.8	65.9
Medium cities	51.6	87.0	72.0	84.8	71.1	76.4	78.3	77.6	75.6
Small cities	60.3	87.8	82.7	89.8	74.9	80.8	82.5	83.0	86.8
Large central	63.8	90.3	83.4	93.6	77.3	81.8	84.4	86.4	86.5
Medium central	61.4	88.3	82.6	90.4	72.1	82.4	81.5	84.5	85.1
Small central	63.2	87.1	81.3	92.3	71.3	77.0	77.9	79.0	85.9
State average	57.5	85.0	77.5	91.7	74.4	73.2	79.0	80.6	82.8

to-obtain Regents Diploma. Presumably, if programs are of poor quality, smaller proportions of students will finish their high school educations or earn a Regents Diploma in the process. In Table 5, we present the percentages of pupils who graduated from New York State's schools in 1983-84 and the type of certificate they received.

Table 5. Percent of High School Graduates with Regents Diploma, 1983-84

District Size	*Number of Diploma Candidates*	*Percent Receiving Regents Diploma*
New York City	37,922	33.3
Large cities	7,238	22.4
Medium cities	3,995	26.1
Small cities	13,880	41.1
Large central	92,462	48.7
Medium central	11,123	45.2
Small central	10,419	45.6
Total	177,039	42.4

In Table 5 we see that, by this index of program quality, New York State's small schools are doing rather well. On average, higher percentages of their students received Regents Diplomas than students in larger school systems.

Student social development. Another kind of outcome measure of program quality is student social development. In the last chapter we noted that students in the small schools we visited seemed to be heavily involved in various extracurricular activities. Such involvement is said to be beneficial to student social growth. For example, it can lead to the development of new competencies. It can provide opportunities for friendships with a more varied group of persons than might otherwise be the case. It can promote personal autonomy. It may provide students with chances to develop leadership skills. It may lessen alienation from school. These important outcomes have little to do with the formal curriculum.

Collecting and analyzing quality data on these topics was well beyond the scope of this project. We did ask one of our associates, however, to review the relevant research on these kinds of outcomes as functions of school size. He concludes:

> accomplishments are higher in small schools [than in large ones]. These differences are directly attributable to size. It is not clear that these have any lasting effects (i.e., into adulthood), but there are so many influences on people throughout their lives that it is hard to draw conclusions about the effects of childhood experiences with much confidence. On the whole, one would think that such high school activities are beneficial, other things being equal.[11]

Of course, we cannot be sure of the extent to which this conclusion applies to New York State's high schools. It is based on many studies that were conducted in other states and at other times. But we can think of no plausible reason why it should not: If being on the basketball team benefits the social development of Iowa's pupils, we suspect that New York State's pupils will be similarly benefitted. We conclude, therefore, that small schools are advantageous to pupils with regard to some aspects of pupils' social development.

Recently, a colleague here at Cornell carried out a study on precisely this topic, quite independently of our research, and based entirely on central New York schools. Schoggen investigated the effects of school size on extracurricular participation in 24 high schools with graduating classes ranging from 21 to 622 students. He concludes:

> In view of the research evidence cited earlier showing that participation in school activities is related to later cognitive, social, and personality development, the findings of the present study, supporting those of earlier studies, suggest that the advantages for the well rounded development of the individual student in small schools—those graduating 150 or fewer students per year—may have been overlooked in the rush to put large numbers of students together in ever larger high schools.[12]

Thus, when we think of program quality in terms of two important student outcomes—measured achievement and social development--we find no convincing evidence that the students of small schools are experiencing inadequate programs. Indeed, and concerning social development, the evidence favors small schools over larger ones.

Curriculum comprehensiveness. But test scores and social development are not always what the State means when it suggests that small schools are inadequate. Typically it means that rural school districts cannot offer a comprehensive high school program. For example, they often cannot offer advanced courses or specialized vocational training. As a consequence, it is claimed, their students are denied equality of educational opportunity. In the previous chapter we saw that the smallest of our districts had considerable difficulty in these regards. Because this assertion is so fundamental to the equity argument we examined it in detail.

Despite the State's assertions about the inadequacy of curricular offerings in small rural New York State schools, we were unable to find studies of the precise ways in which small and large schools' curricula differ. This led us to conduct our own analyses of these differences. Fortunately, the State Education Department annually collects extensive information about teachers and their specific teaching assignments. We used these data as the basis of our inquiry into curricular comprehensiveness.[13]

We construed "comprehensiveness" to denote the variety of courses offered, pupils' ease of access to them, the numbers of students they serve, and the manner in which they are staffed. We limited our analysis to the secondary school curriculum, largely because the data do not distinguish among the various types of instruction provided by elementary school teachers. We compared school districts in which enrollments in grades 9-12 ranged between 100 and 3,000 pupils. At each enrollment level we selected 10 school districts.[14]

Table 6 presents information about course offerings in small and large school districts. We see clearly that the number of different secondary courses offered increases with size. Notice that there is an especially large difference between high schools enrolling 100 and 200, between those enrolling 500 and 1,000, and between those enrolling 1,000 and 1,500 pupils. Moreover, there is no obvious ceiling beyond which districts cease to add new courses to their secondary curriculum. The number of broad subject areas offered (column 2) also increases with enrollment, although we see evidence of a ceiling at approximately 1,500.[15] Again, there is a large difference between the districts at the 100 and 200 levels. The number of different courses offered within each subject, our measure of curricular depth, increases with enrollment with no apparent bound (column 3).

Thus, Table 6 provides evidence consistent with the State's claim that curricular offerings become more comprehensive with larger size. The table also indicates that substantial differences in course offerings exist between the 100 and 200 levels of enrollment. These findings led us to ask what courses we could expect to find in the larger districts that are unavailable in the smaller ones. We singled out four areas of the secondary curriculum for intensive analysis. These were English, foreign language, science, and mathematics.

Table 6. Secondary School Enrollment Levels and the Availability of Core[1] Academic Course Offerings

District Enrollment Levels in Grades 9-12	*(1) Number of Different Full-year Equivalent Courses Offered*[2]	*(2) Number of Subject Areas Offered*	*(3) Number of Different Courses per Subject Area*
100	45.65	8.2	5.11
200	57.80	9.4	5.69
300	61.35	9.1	6.06
400	62.60	9.0	6.08
500	68.20	9.5	6.58
1000	92.15	10.9	7.31
1500	121.55	12.8	8.50
2000	125.25	12.8	8.49
2500	138.05	12.6	9.39
3000	140.10	12.8	9.37

[1] We define "core" to include the following subject areas: English, foreign language (each treated as a separate subject area), mathematics, science, social studies, art, and music.

[2] Full-year equivalent courses are the sum of full-year courses plus one half the number of part-year courses. Courses offered on both a full- and part-year basis are double counted.

Three principal findings emerged from these analyses. First, going from 100 to 200 in a high school's enrollment substantially increases the number of distinct English, foreign langauge, science, and mathematics courses offered. Between 200 and 400 pupils, however, additional enrollment has little effect. This result is consistent with the data in Table 6.

The relatively similar offerings in high schools with enrollments ranging between 200 and 400 exemplifies what we call the "small-small" problem. Suppose two districts are combined with 200 pupils each in grades 9-12.

According to our results, the new 400-pupil district is likely to offer a curriculum that is very similar to what had been offered in its smaller components. These results suggest that combining small districts to form a district that is still small (in an absolute sense) yields very little in terms of course diversity. The newly reorganized small district would still suffer from a limited range of offerings.

Second, the availability of specific courses in the larger districts is rarely high.[16] It appears that although large size is associated with a larger number of different courses, there is little consensus among larger schools over which courses to offer. This finding is consistent with a recent national report on high schools that pointed to the proliferation of high school courses and curricula with little coherence.[17]

Third, courses often touted as the gains from reorganization (e.g., advanced placement offerings) are not as common in large districts as reorganization advocates imply. For example, almost half of the districts we studied with large enrollments (2,500 and 3,000 pupils in grades 9-12) did *not* offer advanced placement courses in chemistry and physics. Moreover, with one exception, the advanced placement offerings in the other subjects we studied were even less widespread. Only 40 percent of the districts with 3,000-pupil high schools offered advanced placement mathematics; 30 percent offered advanced placement foreign language. The exception to this rule was English; 90 percent of the largest districts offered an advanced placement English course.

The fact that enrollment is positively related to the number of different courses offered prompted us to analyze the extent to which students in larger schools take advantage of the courses not found in smaller ones. Table 7 presents these analyses. It indicates that the percentage of students taking courses not available in smaller schools is low. Nowhere in Table 7 does the percentage of students taking advantage of the extra courses offered in the large schools rise above 27 percent. And even this figure is biased upward because a single student taking two different courses not offered in the smallest high school is counted twice. Indeed, in the largest high schools we studied, never did more than 12 percent of the students enroll in courses that are denied to their peers in the smallest high schools.

These striking findings call into question the wisdom of reorganizing school districts for the sake of offering a richer curriculum. Why, one might

Table 7. Percentages of Students Enrolled in Courses *Not* Offered by School Districts with 100 Pupils in Grades 9-12

9-12 Enrollment	*English*	*Foreign Language*	*Mathematics*	*Science*
500	7.56	5.02	8.84	18.36
1,000	11.65	8.45	11.04	14.11
1,500	17.01	13.49	15.50	18.85
2,000	26.05	12.42	17.32	15.98
2,500	20.07	8.50	12.26	22.49
3,000	11.47	9.38	10.85	10.63

reasonably ask, should a district reorganize if only 10 percent or so of its students are likely to benefit?

We also studied the inaccessibility of courses by measuring the incidence of singletons.[18] Not surprisingly, we found a negative relationship between enrollment levels and this measure of inaccessibility.[19] This means that larger high schools tended to offer fewer singletons than smaller ones. Students in high schools with 100 pupils faced curricula with a very high incidence of singletons. To be precise, 72 percent of the courses offered in these high schools were single section courses. This compares to 51 percent of the curriculum in high schools with 200 pupils. Further reduction in the percentage were less dramatic as enrollments rose above 200. The percentage of the curriculum offered in single-section courses stabilized in the neighborhood of 30 percent once enrollments reached 1,000 or above.

Assuming the incidence of singletons is a good measure of course inaccessibility, these results suggest that students in high schools with fewer than 100 pupils suffer not only from a very limited course offering but also from substantially greater difficulties in gaining access to the few courses that are offered. It appears that enrollment gains for these very small high schools can translate into substantial gains in educational opportunity for students.

The next set of analyses concerns the manner in which school districts offer their courses. We studied the characteristics of teachers, average class sizes, and the way in which teachers are distributed across the available classes. Table 8 describes differences among high school teachers in small and large school districts. These data indicate that high school teachers in small districts are less well trained, less experienced, younger, and less well paid. Dramatic differences between 100 and 200 pupil districts (grades 9-12) appear in the experience and salary categories. These results, based on statewide data, are consistent with what we found in our case studies.

Table 8. Selected Secondary Teacher Characteristics[1] in Small Compared with Large Schools in New York State

Enrollments in grades 9-12	*Average degree status*[2]	*Average years of experience in the district*	*Average years of experience outside the district*	*Average age*	*Average salary 1984-85*
100	6.38	9.9	2.8	38.3	$19,901
200	6.42	12.6	1.9	38.7	23,197
300	6.41	11.0	2.5	38.2	21,693
400	6.46	11.7	2.4	38.4	21,771
500	6.40	11.46	2.3	38.0	22,057
1,000	6.97	14.06	2.6	41.7	28,465
1,500	7.07	13.75	2.6	41.5	31,351
2,000	7.00	13.90	2.0	41.3	28,827
2,500	6.98	14.37	2.1	42.1	29,778
3,000	6.91	13.67	2.0	41.3	28,154

[1] Full-time teachers
[2] 5 = B.A.; 6 = B.A. + 30; 7 = M.A.

Table 9 examines the staffing decisions of districts. These analyses begin with comparisons of class sizes in large and small districts at both the primary and secondary levels. There is very little connection between district enrollment and average class size. In the primary grades, classes are slightly smaller, on the average, in districts with the lowest enrollments, but by the time there are 75 pupils per grade, the average class size is no different than that in districts with upward of 750 pupils per grade.

A similar story can be told about secondary class sizes. These tend to be larger than primary classes, but when total enrollment in grades 9-12 reach 400 pupils, there is no further tendency for class size to be related to district size. In short, and with the exception of secondary classes in the smallest school systems, small districts do not necessarily offer small classes.

This is a significant finding, since it has implications for taxpayers of increasing school district enrollments. If we assume that students learn as much in larger classes as they do in smaller ones, an assumption we call into serious question elsewhere,[20] it follows that savings attend the operation of larger classes. But even if we accept this assumption, the results in Table 9 tell us that the savings will only be realized as enrollments rise to the 400 level in grades 9-12. The results also indicate that whatever savings are realized come exclusively from the secondary level of the program. Thus, important questions can be asked about the wisdom of enlarging secondary programs beyond 400 pupils. These results also call into question the wisdom of enlarging primary programs regardless of enrollment level. If we reject the assumption that students learn as much in large as in small classes, the case for maintaining the small classes is further strengthened.

Table 9. Secondary School Enrollment and the Staffing of Core[1] Academic Courses

Enrollment in grades 9-12	*Average class size for K-6 common branch courses*	*Average class size for core secondary course offerings*	*Avg. no of full-year equivalent courses[2] taught by full-time secondary teachers*	*Average number of different preparations for full-year classes for secondary teachers*	*Fraction of full-time secondary teachers in two or more subject areas[3]*	*Fraction of full-time secondary teachers teaching two or more sections of same course[4]*
100	19.79	21.58	5.18	3.34	0.25	0.13
200	20.69	22.00	5.36	2.73	0.26	0.28
300	21.78	24.36	5.07	2.27	0.15	0.39
400	22.73	27.87	5.22	1.99	0.10	0.52
500	22.59	26.06	5.02	1.94	0.13	0.49
1,000	22.24	26.78	4.77	1.91	0.11	0.47
1,500	22.82	25.30	4.83	1.93	0.12	0.50
2,000	21.85	25.84	4.77	2.42	0.09	0.51
2,500	22.46	25.91	4.84	2.39	0.10	0.50
3,000	22.94	26.44	4.67	2.48	0.08	0.50

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[1] We define the core to include the following subject areas: Engligh, foreign language (each treated as a separate subject area), mathematics, science, social studies, art, and music.

[2] Full-year equivalent courses are the sum of full-year courses plus one-half the number of part-year courses. Courses offered on both a full- and part-year basis are double counted.

[3] Subject areas refer to broad areas of curriculum such as mathematics, science, or English.

[4] Courses refer to specific class titles such as algebra, Regents biology, or freshman English.

Finally, we looked at teacher assignments and found that the 400 high school enrollment is a tipping point. Teachers in schools with fewer than 400 pupils have heavier teaching loads both in terms of the number of classes they teach and the number of preparations. They are also less specialized in what they teach. This is true both in terms of the degree to which they stay within a broad subject area and the degree to which they teach multiple sections of the same course.

The fact that teachers in small schools are less specialized than teachers in large schools is hardly surprising. What is more surprising is that the point beyond which there are no further gains in specialization is so low. A 400 pupil high school is not large in any absolute sense. Our data show that beyond 400, there is no tendency to take advantage of whatever gains there are to specialization.

We conclude that the curricular offerings of the very smallest secondary schools in New York State are seriously deficient. These deficiencies begin to appear when enrollment levels in grades 9-12 begin to fall below 400 and become more serious as enrollments fall further. Several of the deficiencies, most notably the availability of courses, the accessibility to the offered courses, and the degree to which teachers can specialize, become especially acute when the grade 9-12 enrollment drops below 100. It follows, then, that there is very little good that can be said about attempts by the State or anyone else to increase enrollment levels in grades 9-12 beyond 400. The only benefit we were able to identify is the fact that variety of course offerings continues to grow beyond the 400-pupil level. But this growth of courses is highly unpredictable and does not lead systematically to the offering of a coherent, widely agreed upon curriculum.

A stronger case can be made for taking steps to increase enrollment up to the 400-pupil level in grades 9-12. Indeed, an especially strong case can be made for doing what we can to get enrollment above 100 pupils in grades 9-12. Specifically, accessibility to courses improves, teacher loads are reduced, and greater teacher specialization can be realized.

While the case may be stronger, it is not air tight. Recall our points about the "small-small" problem. Enrollment gains that move districts within the 200 to 400 enrollment levels in grades 9-12 do not yield dramatic increases in course offerings. Also keep in mind that all of the consequences associated with the increases in secondary class size may not be desirable. A case can be made on behalf of the smaller class sizes we found in the below-400-pupil secondary programs. And finally, a number of the differences we documented between small and large schools are unlikely to be affected by marginal gains in enrollment. These include the characteristics that stem from ruralness rather than smallness. For example, the larger rural school is still likely to employ teachers with less training and experience who, in the early years of their careers, are especially likely to leave.

To summarize, we looked at three aspects of the equity argument: student achievement, student social development, and program comprehensiveness. In regard to the first two of these, we found no compelling evidence to support the State's policy promoting school reorganization. In regard to the third, however, we found evidence that there are equity problems associated with small size. In particular, districts that operate high schools with fewer than 400 students appear to be unable to offer the kinds of programs available to students attending larger high schools. Once secondary schools serve this number of students, however, any further increase is not dependably associated with improved program offerings, nor do a substantial proportion of students avail themselves of them.

Equity is not the only issue involved. We need to turn our attention to the second argument for reorganization, efficiency.

The Efficiency Argument

In the Master Plan of 1958, New York State specified both minimum and optimum sizes for elementary and secondary schools. It suggested that the minimum size of elementary schools should be 140 pupils, with optimums running from 420 to 630, depending on class size. It suggested that no high school should go below 500 pupils and that "an adequate program and staff can most successfully be provided for a separate junior and senior high school of 700 or more pupils each." "Any smaller enrollment must result in a severely limited program or extremely excessive cost."[21] Here, the State is making the efficiency argument.

Recall that the efficiency contention rests on the notion of economies of scale. In principle this argument is simple; large schools can offer a given program at a lower unit expense than can small ones. It is obvious that the per-pupil cost of teaching the same chemistry course is lower when the number of students enrolled is 15 instead of 5.

If the argument is simple in principle, it is anything but simple in application. For more than two decades the economics of education literature has been filled with studies and debates about this matter. Early in this period much of the research and debate turned on the notion of the "optimal" size of districts, schools, and classrooms. If one thing is now clear, it is that this notion is relatively useless. Guthrie, one of the nation's foremost experts in the economics of education concludes:

> Evidence in favor of cost savings associated with larger size schools and school districts is, at best, ambiguous. In the instance of rural schools, the setting where consolidation has been most dramatic, it is exceedingly unclear that efficiency favors larger organizations.[22]

Our own review of this literature suggests that economies of scale are possible in education, but that diseconomies seem to be equally likely.[23] Most importantly, it is unclear from the extant research when the latter will surpass the former. This is because a multitude of factors determines the "tipping point," and these factors and their combinations are unique to each situation. Thus, when State officials urge a consolidation of two or more school systems, they cannot assume that the resulting district will be able to offer the same (or better) services at a lower cost without a highly sophisticated study of the particular instance. Such studies are not done.

We conclude that a statewide optimal size standard, such as is found in the Master Plan, is unjustified. Perhaps when the Master Plan was first prepared, such a standard was defensible. It no longer is. It follows that attempting to apply such a standard is also unjustified.

Overall, there is no compelling evidence that either equality of educational opportunity or increased efficiency is routinely served by school district reorganization. These goals may be served by reorganizing in particular instances, i.e., in the case of a particular school district, but the State's obligation to insure equity and efficiency in its schools is not predictably furthered by this device. It follows, then, that there is no justification for continuing to offer very substantial financial incentives to small schools systems that agree to merge.

THE EFFECTS OF REORGANIZATIONS AND ATTEMPTED REORGANIZATIONS

Recall that we selected some of the districts to study for this report on the grounds that they had either reorganized or attempted to reorganize. In this section we want to examine the results of those actions. Most of our discussion, therefore, will be drawn from our associates' case studies of the following districts:

> *Eatonton.* This is the oldest consolidation we examined. It may also be the most contentious in recent history. The merger of the Meridian and Batesville districts to form Eatonton occurred in the late 1960s.
>
> *Southeast Central.* This district was formed in the early 1970s of three contiguous school systems. There is currently some talk of merging Southeast Central with Hamlet, another of our case studies.
>
> *Gramville-Ellison.* This district is the product of a recent consolidation of two very small school systems.
>
> *New Hope* and *Arcadia.* These two districts attempted a centralization in the early 1980s. Residents overwhelmingly rejected the proposal.

Rather than describe the events in each of these districts (readers are invited to read the case studies cited in Chapter 2), we will organize our discussion loosely around the steps, described earlier, that occur in a consolidation effort. Accordingly, we will discuss initiation and feasibility studies, community decision making, and the aftermath of reorganization.

Initiation and Feasibility Studies

There is a rhetoric and a reality to the initiation of school district consolidations and to the studies that are carried out to examine their feasibility. In regard to initiation the rhetoric is clear:

> Over the years the Legislature has provided financial advantages in State aid as an incentive toward reorganization. In all cases, it should be stressed, such reorganization was instigated and approved by the voters themselves...[24]

The State contends that the option to reorganize emerges from the people of a community who are concerned about the quality of their schools.

The reality, however, is quite different. We could find no instance where the original idea to combine adjacent school districts emerged from residents. As far as we can tell, the idea is typically the product of professional educators—most often, District Superintendents working in conjunction with school superintendents and boards. Perhaps in the distant past ordinary citizens initiated merger proposals, but that seems no longer to be the case. Laymen first become involved when the idea is broached to the local boards of education.

In itself, where the idea arises is a trivial matter. Indeed, we would be surprised if residents of a community conceived of the notion and brought it to the professionals. After all, school reorganization is an arcane subject with which most people are unfamiliar. The significance of the locus of origination, we believe, is the profound impact it has on the shape of subsequent events.

We have already noted the view of the State concerning this matter. It can be succinctly described: Big is better. That view is shared by many school administrators and it is certainly held by the majority of District Superintendents.[25] However, this is decidedly *not* the view of many residents in small towns. Research by one of our associates is clear: School centralization has been a contentious topic throughout most of this century.[26] School patrons, by and large, start from a position of skepticism if not outright opposition; they must be convinced that larger districts provide a better and more economical education than smaller ones.

The problem for the State and the professional educators who initiate and promote the idea, therefore, is to convince a skeptical community of its merits. This need to convince has had a profound effect on the ensuing debate, for it has shaped the nature of the "facts" presented to the public and the ways in which those "facts" are introduced into community decision making. In short, the State has had to actively sell reorganization.

Evidence for this interpretation is plentiful. Consider the feasibility studies required before a reorganization can even come to vote. Most often these studies seem to have been carried out by current or retired school administrators, especially District Superintendents. In our examination of the studies available to us, we have yet to find one that did not recommend reorganization. Perhaps there are such studies, but we did not see one. Frankly, we find it difficult to believe that a conclusion supporting school reorganization could possibly be justified in all cases. As we have already demonstrated, there are many small school systems in New York State whose problems will not be solved by merging with their neighbors.

Our difficulty with these studies is not simply that their conclusions are inevitably favorable. More fundamentally, we are troubled by the one-sidedness and "boilerplate" quality of the information presented in these reports. Their essential character seems to be that only the benefits of the proposed merger are explained—programs will improve, costs will be less burdensome, State aid will be forthcoming. In short, children will get a better (and cheaper) education. We have seen instances where purported financial benefits were substantially inflated. The implicit message is clear: To be against the proposed reorganization is to be against good education for children. Possible disadvantages to a merger, however, are either ignored or are given short shrift. The objections of residents and possible ill-effects on a community are not systematically considered. The advantages of small size are not explicitly presented. The negative research findings bearing on consolidation are entirely ignored. The one-sided character of these studies, we believe, is a direct consequence of professional educators' perception of the need to "sell" a reorganization to an "unenlightened" and unwilling community.

Selling mergers does not end with the preparation of the required study. It permeates the entire process, with school boards often becoming willing participants. In one district we examined, the study was contracted for with the apparent understanding that it would recommend consolidation. Here is the consultant's recollections of his original contact with the districts:

> When they approached me...they asked me if I could do the study so that they could have it late August or early September, because they wanted to have the vote before the end of the calendar year....Maybe they felt that before Christmas people are in a more positive mood. Maybe after Christmas when the bills come in you're in a more negative mood...
>
> I know another reason why they wanted to have it as early as possible was because if it did go through they wanted the maximum time for planning, for budgeting as a combined district, which they did in what appeared to me to be a very systematic manner, and so, you know, it all turned out very positively.

Indeed, in this case, the feasibility study was contracted for *after* a public meeting in which SED officials, local administrators and board members explained the benefits of a merger. Under such conditions an objective study of the advantages and disadvantages of a merger would be extremely difficult. For the consultant to conclude that reorganization was not feasible would have been tantamount to finding that local administrators and State officials had make a mistake.

Community Decision Making

When reorganization proposals are initiated in this manner it is understandable that community discussion takes on an adversarial quality. School patrons are, in effect, presented with a recommendation that touches important aspects of their children's lives, and that recommendation is presented as if all of the relevant evidence makes its acceptance obvious. But, as we have seen, creating larger school districts from smaller ones is not patently desirable. As a result, the usual sequence of events in a community is that, along with the unveiling of the feasibility study and favorable recommendations by the boards of education, an ad hoc group of citizens is organized to promote the proposed consolidation. Often the core of this group is members of the PTA, who are enlisted to secure the necessary signatures on a petition to the Commissioner of Education. (Recall that a degree of community support for the idea must be demonstrated before the Commissioner will authorize a referendum.)

Public meetings are held in order to acquaint residents with the proposed reorganization. Board members, school administrators, District Superintendents and often SED officers are on hand to explain the benefits of the consolidation and to answer questions. These meetings also provide the first public forum for those who oppose the merger. Predictably, opposition to the proposal emerges at this time.

Residents who oppose the reorganization also organize, hold meetings, write letters to the local papers and recruit supporters. In some cases, as in Eatonton, the opposition is joined by dissident members of the Boards of Education.

This process is simply one of community conflict. Interest groups form, leaders emerge, points of view are expressed, and attempts are made to sway voters to one side or the other. There is nothing remarkable about these things; they are the everyday stuff of ordinary political life in a democracy. Legislative bodies and the voting public are often the targets of influence attempts. Various interest groups try to influence the decisions of city councils, State legislatures, the Congress, or voters.

What is unusual in the case of the reorganization conflicts we studied is the identity of the protagonists. In consolidation efforts a chief protagonist has been the legislative body itself, namely, the school board. That is, boards often actively promote a consolidation. In effect, school consolidation attempts have pitted a segment of a community against their elected representatives as well as against another segment of the citizenry. As we shall see, in Eatonton and Southeast Central at least, this opposition has had long-term adverse consequences for the governance of the school districts.

Numerous issues emerge during a community's debate over consolidation. The most prominent among these are, of course, the matter of program quality and cost, since these initially motivate the proposed merger. Opponents question whether purported gains will be realized. But, in the districts we studied, we found no instance where opponents of the reorganization marshalled solid contrary evidence. Citizens never presented the kinds of analyses we offered above regarding educational achievement, attainment, and efficiency. That should not surprise anyone, of course, since the opponents of consolidation were inevitably laymen. There is no reason to expect the residents of these villages to be familiar with the arcane literature on economies of scale, for example.

There is, on the other hand, every reason to expect school administrators and State officials to be familiar with that literature. It is, or should be, part of their professional knowledge. The fact that such contrary evidence was not introduced into the discussions by consultants and professional educators says much about the need to sell reorganization.

There are two obvious explanations for its absence from these debates: Either the educators and consultants were ignorant of their own profession's research literature, or they were familiar with it and chose not to mention it. Either explanation should give pause.

If laymen did not raise the issues provoked by the professional literature and research, they did raise other important matters of substance. Some of these have to do with perceived political inequities between the merging districts. Here is an Ellison teacher on one of these:

> I don't think that Ellison [wanted] the merger, but the State didn't give us too many alternatives on how we could vote....We didn't stand

> a...chance because there are twice as many voters over there [in Gramville] as there are over here.

The issue raised by this person concerns the way in which votes are counted in reorganization referenda. When districts vote on a centralization proposal, ballots from each district are first intermingled and then counted. As a consequence, no one ever knows how his or her own community felt on the issue. When districts are of substantially unequal size (as in Gramville-Ellison), the will of the larger community is capable of over- riding the will of the smaller. However, even if districts were equal in their number of voters, it is possible for the majority of one district to be opposed to reorganization and yet find their district merged.

We have heard State officials offer two rationales for this method of counting votes. In the past, when many districts were consolidated in a single referendum, counting votes separately in each would have made it possible for a negative outcome in one district, especially if it were geographically central, to thwart the will of all of the others. In those instances, merging ballots made a good deal of sense. Today, such massive reorganizations are very unlikely. Now, the merger of two districts is the norm. We were also told that combining votes fosters a sense of a single community, rather than two or more separate ones. This rationale is implausible. A sense of community is unlikely to be much affected by one referendum vote. Further, the State's willingness to accept hyphenated names for newly consolidated districts (e.g., Gramville-Ellison), thereby maintaining old identities intact, renders the rationale disingenuous.

In the districts we studied where there was a successful centralization, the question of exactly who supported the merger has been a continuing sore point. Because ballots are intermingled, it is possible for any community to claim to have opposed the reorganization, attributing its passage to the other district. This has created lingering hostilities that have affected subsequent actions. For example, in Southeast Central, where three districts merged by a very close vote, distrust among the three communities was very high for a period of more than 10 years. As a consequence, five separate building proposals, ranging from an entirely new school to renovations of existing structures, have been turned down. One of these involved the refusal to accept an outright grant of $250,000. In our interviews, residents, board members, teachers, and students blamed the defeat of these proposals on the three communities' unwillingness to spend money on a building located in one of the other villages. As a result, Southeast Central's building aid, granted as a result of its reorganization, expired without any major capital projects having been approved. Eatonton has had a similar history.

The issue of relative voting strength spills over into a concern about the election of a Board of Education if the reorganization is accomplished. An Ellison resident, discussing the first election following the merger of the two districts, had this to say:

> From now on they [Gramville] will outvote us on every issue. We've got a local man who is running for the school board because one of [its] members is retiring. Someone is running from over there too...Even though [our] candidate was a former president of [Ellison's] school board, I'm sure as lightning he won't even get off the ground.

This concern is sensible. When the merging districts are of substantially unequal size, the smaller may relinquish an effective voice in school affairs.

We noted another problematic feature of these reorganizations. Voters are asked to approve a merger without knowing exactly what they are committing themselves to. That is, after a centralization is effected, a new board is elected and the fate of the school district rests with this new body. Before the vote, however, "selling" a consolidation requires speculation about the actions of this new board. This speculation, of course, has no legal standing after the merger. One of the concerns of residents is always that "their" school would be closed if a merger is effected. In Yorkville, for example, school boards apparently promised that local elementary schools would remain open after the merger. Thirty years after its centralization, Yorkville residents still speak of "broken promises" when two outlying elementary schools needed to be closed in 1979.

But not breaking these "gentlemen's agreements" also creates problems. To gain support for a consolidation the former boards in Southeast Central's component districts promised to put additions on existing schools instead of constructing a new one. However, as a board member, who was elected after the merger recounts:

> Well, after the new board was seated, they started to look into what it would cost to do that versus a new building. To us it did not seem feasible or practical [to do additions]. There was absolutely no way in this whole blue sky of convincing the people that that was the right way to go, "because you told us before you reorganized that we would not have a new building program."

Thus, to honor promises made years before by individuals not empowered to make such commitments, the district had to keep buildings open that probably should have been closed.

These concerns can prompt reasonable people to oppose even considering a reorganization. Once they agree to support a centralization referendum, voters effectively relinquish control of their schools in two ways: first to a larger ad hoc political entity—the entire voting population of the districts involved—and then to an unknown school board not yet in office.

In this matter of control, the State's present procedure for handling annexations has much to recommend it. In an annexation the ballots of the districts are kept separate; unless each votes affirmatively, the annexation is defeated. Further, there is a school board in power—the one in the annexing district. It is in a position to make commitments to the voters in the district being annexed. Thus, if those voters have concerns about the future of some aspect of their school system, there is a body empowered to speak to those concerns and make legitimate promises. These virtues are unavailable in the case of centralization.

Differences in wealth, indebtedness, or the quality of facilities and programs between two districts also create issues when a reorganization is considered. These differences need not be real; they need only be perceived as real. In the case of New Hope and Arcadia, these perceived differences contributed to the decisive defeat of a merger. Here is what our associate had to say about the matter:

> Many of the citizens of New Hope were unsure about acquiring the problems and debts accumulated by Arcadia if the two districts merged. The main argument focused on the fact that the school in New Hope was relatively new and free of debt. The school in Arcadia was in terrible condition and of questionable value. Moreover, many of the New Hope citizens expressed concern about merging with Arcadia because the school was so small and the area very poor. The concern was about the quality of the services Arcadia would bring to the merger. The State had been arguing that the quality of education in small schools was not good. This raised doubts in the minds of citizens in New Hope about the value of reorganization for them. Certainly it had advantages for the citizens, students and teachers of Arcadia, but it appeared that New Hope would receive nothing but the problems that Arcadia had accumulated over the years.[27]

These perceived inequalities posed difficult problems for State officials and other proponents of the reorganization. On the one hand, if the inequalities were real, to acknowledge them was to provide an excellent reason for New Hope residents to vote against the merger. This issue was not systematically examined in the feasibility study, the proper place to consider it. On the other hand, to take the position that both districts were equally deficient was to fly in the face of New Hope's residents' convictions that their school system was better. Moreover, for the State to concede that the program in New Hope the larger district) was as deficient as the one in Arcadia would be tantamount to conceding that larger size does not necessarily translate into better programs.

Further, and regardless of the relative quality of each district, the residents of both were generally positive about their own schools. Each person interviewed had something good to say about the education students received. (This perception of quality was not without foundation; according to every objective measure available to us, the students of both systems were doing rather well.) Hence, SED officials' claims that both districts were not providing a good education were treated with considerable skepticism. As one resident put it:

> If the State is going to ask us to consolidate our school district with Arcadia because they think our curriculum is substandard, they are first going to have to prove that it is substandard.

Apparently this proved impossible. The merger was defeated by a very wide margin.

The attempted merger of New Hope and Arcadia is interesting for quite another reason. These districts became a kind of experiment and showcase for a new mode of decision making in district consolidation. Essentially, the SED opted to drop the usual procedure and make an all-out effort to involve the entire community in the reorganization decision. Its notion was that if residents felt involved in the decision-making process, their resistance to the consolidation would be minimized.

A representative of the State Education Department arrived on the scene to organize and coordinate the campaign for consolidation. Instead of the usual "outside consultant" carrying out a feasibility study, eleven separate committees were formed composed of community residents. Organized and charged by the State Education Department's representative, each committee studied a particular aspect of the proposed reorganization—e.g., programs, facilities, or transportation—and made a recommendation to the two boards. As described by a state official to a local reporter:

> This is actually a pilot program, a brand new way to go about consolidation. It is being watched all over the State and will provide an enormous amount of useful information for the future. Its impact on other districts that might be considering consolidation will be tremendous.

And a member of the State Assembly remarked to the school boards:

> An awful lot of people are looking at this one merger....If a trend becomes apparent statewide for communities to decide on their own consolidation, then the State will begin making dramatic changes in the incentive aid formula.

Both New Hope and Arcadia had histories of rejecting merger attempts. The rationale of the State was that previous resistance was not based on substantive grounds as much as on "poor human relations" and inadequate community involvement. Therefore, a considered attempt was made to involve residents, and a serious effort was mounted to communicate with voters:

> The committees made out reports and sent them to individuals on the mailing list at the school....We provided copies at a downtown store location, and put them on the counters so people could get committee reports....We had all kinds of public meetings to answer questions that people might have on the merger....We met with anybody and everybody. We met at firehalls, we had meetings here at the New Hope High School, and we had meetings at Arcadia. Ron Andy [the superintendent] was in meetings just about every night of the week.

All eleven committees unanimously supported the merger. On the day of the referendum, the voters rejected it by a landslide.

We find this case instructive. It illustrates, we believe, the consequences of treating community resistance to school consolidation as a matter of style and "good human relations" rather than a matter of substance. The State Education Department claims to have based its strategy on a common social science model of grassroots community change. In fact, its strategy was a perversion of that model. Instead of a grassroots movement, the events in New Hope and Arcadia more closely resemble a carefully orchestrated sales campaign. The strategy was certainly effective in getting community involvement. The turnout of voters on the day of the referendum was unprecedented. Judging from the returns, however, it seems that the more the merger was sold to residents, the more reasons they found to oppose it.

The Aftermath of Reorganization

Reorganizations—whether failed or successful—are not over when they are over. In every district we studied we found evidence of lingering effects. We have already mentioned one of these—the persisting antagonisms among the component districts that now make up Southeast Central and their effect on the district's building program. We need to examine these more closely.

We noted in the last chapter that schools are important institutions, touching the lives of most adults and the welfare of their children. It is natural, then, that conflicts over school issues, and merger attempts in particular, become rancorous. Sometimes this rancor reaches very high levels and affects future attempts at consolidation in the same or other districts. Again, Southeast Central provides an example. Its centralization was inordinately acrimonious. Today, the district is still very small (592 pupils), and the issue of another merger (with Hamlet) has arisen. Their earlier reorganization was so traumatic, however, that, regardless of any benefits a merger with Hamlet might have, residents are unwilling to go through the process again. Southeast Central's superintendent was asked what his community's feelings were about another merger. He responded:

> On a survey that we did, that was an absolute "no" item, probably one of the biggest no's of all time. They're not interested in this again. They never want a fight started, and they never want to have the telephones ringing again, brothers and sisters not speaking to each other, the emotionalism. They're over that. You ask them are we a better district for it, I think most people would tell you yes. But they never want to go through it again.

We do not know whether a merger of Southeast Central with Hamlet has merit. Even assuming that it does and that the education of the students in both districts would be substantially improved, there is now little chance of that occurring.

Among our cases, Gramville-Ellison clearly presents the best example of a successful consolidation. Following the merger in 1984, the new district offered more extensive programs than either of its components had previously provided. A wider array of courses and more sections of courses are offered at the secondary level. For example, public speaking, creative writing, two foreign languages, and art are now available to former Ellison students. Courses in homemaking, office procedures, and psychology are now provided to former Gramville pupils. In addition, some courses that neither district had given are now scheduled. Benefits have accrued at the elementary level as well. A grade previously operated as a combined classroom (e.g., first and second graders together under one teacher) has been eliminated. A full-day kindergarten is now offered to Gramville children, and art taught by a specialist is available to pupils from both districts. We view these changes as positive. As nearly as we can tell from the available data, the merger of the two districts was a desirable event.

Even in the case of this seemingly sensible consolidation, however, the "selling" of the merger in the days before the referendum has returned to trouble the new district. Gramville, in its life as an independent system, had apparently never experienced a budget defeat. In 1985, as Gramville-Ellison, it suffered two.

The primary cause of these defeats seems to have been the impression left with voters that their taxes would go down as a result of the consolidation. In the first year following the merger they did go down, though the decrease was nowhere near the amount predicted in the feasibility study. In that year the budget was passed. In the following year the first proposed budget was 16 percent higher than the previous one and called for a tax increase of 7 to 9 percent (depending on particular propositions on the ballot). When this was defeated, the second proposal cut the budget by a little more than $40,000 and increased the levy by about 3 percent. This was defeated even more decisively. Finally, a third attempt was made, which cut another $45,000. The third effort was accompanied by a statement that its defeat would result in a "contingency" budget eliminating the purchase of library books, athletic programs, and community use of school facilities, among other things. It passed.

We can never know what precisely caused the negative votes in these budget defeats. But our associate, who attended the public hearings, interviewed residents, and followed the local press coverage, came to a very firm conclusion. The primary problem stemmed from people's understanding of what had been promised them during the reorganization campaign: They had been promised lower taxes. Board members, administrators, and the consultant claim that residents misunderstood; they thought their taxes were going to go down and stay down. A former board member explained:

> When we merged a lot of people got the erroneous idea that we had said that taxes would go down from now on....They are not taking into consideration the fact that taxes just naturally would have continued to have gone up because of the cost of living, because of the increase in all of our supplies and services, the money we had to pay out, the increase in the cost of the staff...Now taxes are...a lot less than they would have been...if we had not merged, but they're not taking that into consideration.

The first part of this assertion is implausible on its face: We doubt that there are any New York State taxpayers naive enough to believe that, as the result of any governmental action, "taxes [will] go down from now on." The second part, however, is plausible; costs increase, and taxes without the consolidation might have increased even more rapidly than they have with it. That, however, is not the point. The issue is whether people misunderstood what they were told. Quoting directly from the consultant's report, here is precisely and fully what they were told:

> The reorganization plan including the housing, instructional, staffing, and transportation proposals will result in savings to the taxpayers of the reorganized district. The major savings result from reduction in staff and the 20 percent increase in formula operating aid. Savings in the reduction in staff positions including fringe are projected to be $117,250. The increase in operating aid for the 1983-84 year is projected to be $154,256.
>
> These changes in incentive operating aid and budget result in a projected 21.6 percent decrease in tax rate on true value for [Gramville] and 35.5 percent in [Ellison]. The reorganized district true tax rate per $1,000 is projected to be $10.7684, a decrease from [Gramville's] $13.7397 and [Ellison's] $16.6976.

At issue here is not the exceedingly inaccurate projections, though those certainly contributed to "misunderstandings". (In the first year of the consolidation, Gramville's residents saw a reduction in their tax rates of only 4.75 percent, instead of the predicted 21.6 percent; in Ellison, the analogous figures are 21 percent and 35.5 percent.) At issue is whether residents misunderstood what they were told. There is no mention in this report of the likely duration of any period of lowered taxes, nor were cost projections made beyond the first year of the consolidation. In brief, people were given highly optimistic figures for the first year and left to infer what they would for the more distant future. Perhaps that counts as misunderstanding. We think not. As a local columnist wrote after the first budget defeat:

> For the first time in the history of the centralized school in our community, the populace voted the projected school budget down. It appears that there is too little understanding of what and why, to find a tax increase plausible *after all of the rhetoric that accompanied the new centralization. What happened to "incentive aid*?" (Emphasis ours)

Thus, the consolidation of Gramville-Ellison, which in many respects seems to have been highly desirable, has been marred by an unfortunate desire to put the best face possible on the reorganization proposal. We cannot know how long the district's budgets will be at risk because of this desire to sell consolidation. But a more straightforward explanation of its tax impact and a thoroughgoing attempt to project accurately multi-year costs might have saved the fledgling district considerable trouble.

The case of Eatonton presents the most convincing evidence of the sometimes long-run debilitating effects of district reorganization. One of our associates studied the history of this district in great detail, and has provided a wealth of information on the political as well as educational ramifications of its consolidation.[28]

Eatonton was created in 1968 as the result of the consolidation of Batesville and Meridian school districts. In an earlier attempt at merger, in 1963, a third district had been scheduled for inclusion, but it pulled out before the referendum was held because of its fear of diluting its tax base by joining its less wealthy neighbors.[29]

Both Batesville and Meridian, two very small rural villages, seem to have had prosaic histories for at least 20 years before their merger. According to the evidence available to us, the residents of the two communities were satisfied with their schools. There was, for example, very little turnover among school board members. In Batesville only ten different persons served on the board for the 17-year period from 1950 to 1967. A similar pattern was evident in Meridian, where one person actually served on the board of education from 1936 until 1968. This stability was also reflected in the tenure of the districts' administrators, some of whom served for 20 years. Further, referenda for new building projects were routinely approved, as were annual budgets. No one remembers a budget being defeated in either school system before 1968. Records show that the business of running the schools went along with few complaints from the public and that few issues divided the boards or set them in opposition to their chief school officers.

After their merger, an entirely different picture immediately emerged for the new district of Eatonton. Although we do not have the space to discuss the history of Eatonton in detail, we need to present a brief account of that history.

Both districts were scheduled for consolidation in the 1958 Master Plan. The prime movers behind the 1963 attempt and the 1968 success in bringing the district into compliance with the Plan were the District Principal and the District (BOCES) Superintendent, with the support of the SED. Following the formation of committees to study the proposed merger (committees that opponents of the merger later claimed were "stacked"), numerous meetings were held and literature prepared explaining the benefits of the consolidation. It was at this point that intense opposition and strong emotions became evident. Members of both boards of education resigned, and at least one became very active in the opposition movement. Opposition concerned the substantive matters of whether programs would be improved and costs lowered as well as procedural ones regarding how information was presented to voters.[30]

The referendum was held on May 1, 1968. It was very close: 894 for and 890 against with 15 ballots blank or void. The vote was immediately challenged, and ultimately this challenge reached the Commissioner and the Court of Appeals where, in January 1970, the merger was finally upheld. The ironic aspect of this event was that some residents were so opposed to the consolidation that they caused their own votes to be voided by adding to their ballots extraneous remarks intended to dramatize their high level of opposition. Had these votes been counted, the merger would have been defeated.

While this two-year court battle went on, the merger was essentially on hold, with both districts, although legally consolidated, operating entirely separate programs. Feelings in the communities continued to mount. As described in a local newspaper:

> It has been neighbor against neighbor and former friend against former friend ever since the voting irregularity charges were first filed. Several board members and one administrator resigned; one board president stepped down and later resigned his post entirely. Some charged (but never substantiated) that the board held secret sessions.

For 20 years the story of Eatonton has been one of episodic conflict. School administrators at both the building and district level have turned over frequently. Board members come and go, many running on single issues (e.g., get rid of—or keep—a particular administrator), and once having accomplished their goal, resign. As in Southeast Central, the board has never been able to agree on the site for a building and consequently has failed to take advantage of its state incentive grant. Teachers have presented the board with "no confidence" votes and forced the resignation of an administrator. A majority of the board has resigned en masse, causing the District Superintendent to appoint members so that Eatonton could be legally governed. As a final point of interest, a resident managed to gather more than 1,600 signatures on a petition to the Commissioner to "de-merge" the district. The Commissioner refused to do so.

For 17 years following its creation, Eatonton has been a tumultuous school district, to a substantial degree because of an ill-considered and ill-timed consolidation. Of course, the district is not typical. It is nevertheless informative. Earlier we remarked on the unusual politics of school district consolidations, which make school boards central protagonists in the midst of community conflicts, pitting them against a segment of their own constituencies. We think the histories of Batesville, Meridian, and Eatonton (as well as South Central) illustrate the danger of this.

These communities had formerly viewed their elected school boards as deliberative bodies charged with mediating disputes and carrying out the will of the majority. If board decisions did not always suit everyone, that was to be expected; it was the way legislative bodies were supposed to work. In Southeast Central and Eatonton, however, the boards' deliberative function became subservient to their role as protagonists. They, and the administrators they hired, became adversaries to a large minority—perhaps a majority—of residents. In short, school consolidation in these communities taught people to fight—not *over* their schools but *with* their schools.

In discussing this conclusion with others, some have suggested that we are, in effect, urging that boards of education divest themselves of their leadership responsibilities. That is not our point. Clearly boards must evidence leadership. But school consolidation is patently a political issue as well as an educational one. It is, after all, decided by a political mechanism, a referendum. Thus, what these persons are asking is that boards provide political leadership. Yet, as every politician knows, political leadership in a democracy is always constrained by the nature of the issue at stake and by voter support. Although legislative bodies are occasionally "ahead" of citizens on some issue, they are never very far ahead—at least publicly. That is, they never try to exercise "leadership" by strenuously advocating something that a majority (or even a substantial minority) of the voters oppose. This is even more the case when the issue involved engenders strong feelings. When, for example, did we last see our State Legislature, as a body, trying to drum up support for a policy that sharply divides New York's citizens? Accomplished politicians are not so naive as to confuse such behavior with "leadership."

Rather than exercise such a highly proactive role in consolidations, school boards should exercise a more deliberative one. Current law requires boards to vote to *consider* reorganization; it does not require them to advocate, sell or push the issue. This makes good sense. We have found that to the degree that boards actively promote reorganization, serious and long-lasting problems are created.

There are ample opportunities in consolidation attempts for boards to exercise sound political leadership short of pushing for a particular outcome. They can, for example, commission studies and insist that these studies truly and competently examine all sides of the matter; they can insure these studies' wide dissemination; they can hold public hearings for the purpose of listening to their communities, not selling them on an idea; and they can conduct surveys of all residents' opinions so as not to miss the voice of those who do not or cannot attend meetings. *Then*, if consolidation seems to have merit and be politically viable, they could endorse the idea of a petition requesting the Commissioner to schedule a referendum on the matter.

All of these actions are examples of sound political leadership. None requires a board to become anyone's adversary. The point is that school boards do not need to actively push reorganization, since the decision is ultimately the community's. They need to gather information, carefully deliberate the issue, and then decide if reorganization has enough merit to place the issue before the community for decision. That is what the law requires of them.

Finally, what is notable about the consolidation issue is that it is an all-or-nothing proposition. Either districts consolidate or they do not. There is no possibility of compromise, no solution that can accommodate legitimate but conflicting interests, no way of moving partway toward a goal without going the whole distance. If the art of good politics is the art of compromise, reorganization leaves little room for good politics—even were school boards capable of it. (We shall have more to say about changes that should be made in this "all or nothing" character of reorganizations in our policy recommendations.)

Perhaps the final irony of the Eatonton story concerns the role of the State and the district administrators involved. With the best of intentions, they actively encouraged two small rural school districts to consolidate, districts whose residents were demonstrably satisfied with the education their children were receiving. The rationale offered was that education in the districts would be improved. Perhaps the residents were unjustifiably complacent; their schools may not have been as good as they thought they were. Even so, in the name of improved education, the professional educators of Meridian, Batesville and the State arguably made that education worse.

We say "arguably." Ultimately we cannot know whether consolidation was a good thing in Southeast Central and Eatonton. Our associates' judgments are that both districts have better educational programs as a result. In summarizing the events in Eatonton, one has written:

> What would have happened in two small rural districts in central New York had the total impact of reorganization been appreciated and understood can only be conjectured. It seems plausible to suggest that reorganization could have been delayed and the turmoil which developed over the procedural issues surrounding the reorganization could have been avoided, while meeting the needs of the children in an educationally and fiscally responsible manner. Students have had the advantages of specialized services and a greater variety of courses than they probably would have had if the two districts had remained separate. One must wonder how much of the human effort that was spent in the conflict over reorganization and in adapting to the frequent turnover in administrators and board members might have been more productively spent in building a [better] school district....On balance, the reorganization of the Batesville and Meridian Central School Districts into the Eatonton Central School District was more appropriate. [But] more sensitivity to the issues of concern to the residents and a better sense of timing would have made a very difficult and trying period very much less so.

And another associate, writing of Southeast Central concludes as follows:

> Educators would rightly argue that the increase in the number of courses and sections of courses significantly improves the educational opportunities for Southeast Central students, and that makes all the hassles worthwhile. Thirteen years, however, is a long time for a school district to operate in a hostile environment. Perhaps, as the high school principal suggests, if they had waited a few years and allowed more community support to build up, the transition would have been smoother.

CONCLUSIONS

In the previous chapter we discussed some of the folklore of rural education—the strengths and weakness of small schools. We saw that this folklore is made up of accurate and inaccurate beliefs—of truth and wishful thinking. Here we have examined the folklore of reorganization. It too is composed of truth and wishful thinking. The folklore on this topic, however, is qualitatively different. Both the truth and the wishful thinking are embedded in the law, in educational policy, and in the actions of state officials. We have reached several conclusions about this folklore.

The evidence we have amassed has led us to what we believe to be an irrefutable conclusion: New York State, through its laws, its policies, the procedures of its State Education Department, and the actions of its officials in Albany and at the local level, has behaved as if small size is a serious defect. It has assumed small size to be the cause of many, if not most, of the problems of rural school districts.

Accordingly, the State has pushed reorganization on its small rural schools in myriad ways, perhaps most notably and effectively by offering them large financial incentives to merge with their neighbors. But it has also pushed reorganization much less obviously—e.g., through feasibility studies that present only one side of the issue, through carefully orchestrated selling campaigns, and through voting procedures that effectively negate local autonomy.[31]

By and large this push has been highly successful. As we have seen, the number of school districts in New York State has declined drastically in the last half century. Partly because of this very success, we conclude that school reorganization has largely run its course. Our data indicate that the number of reorganizations in New York State has slowed to a trickle in the last decade.[32] The small districts that remain, we believe, are likely to be small for some very good reasons—their location, or the sparsity of their population, for example. We count among these good reasons an expressed desire on the part of their citizens to remain small. Put another way, absent a compelling State interest, districts that prefer not to consolidate with their neighbors should not be manipulated into doing so.

We have tried to examine closely the nature of any compelling State interest in school reorganization. Such interests are of two general types, equity and efficiency. In considering the issue of equity, we looked at the evidence regarding the achievement, attainment and the social development of students enrolled in small rural schools. We found little to suggest that these students would be better off were they to attend larger ones. In fact, there are some good reasons to suspect the reverse.[33]

In the case of efficiency, we looked at the extensive literature on economies of scale. We concluded that although large schools may offer such economies, they also face diseconomies of scale, and that the point of balance between these two is entirely unclear and idiosyncratic. Perhaps one of the most enduring bits of wishful thinking in the reorganization folklore concerns the notion of an optimal size for school districts. That notion is pure fantasy.

Yet, we also found that as districts fall below 400 students in grades 9-12, pupils are more likely to be denied an opportunity to take courses commonly offered in larger secondary schools. Further, required teacher effort tends to be excessive in those districts, with a concomitant reduction in teacher expertise that results from being spread thinly over a large number of courses.

Counterbalancing these findings, however, our analyses also suggest that larger schools are often characterized by a "shopping mall" curriculum, i.e., one with no obvious coherence and a plethora of courses relatively tangential to the schools' central purpose. For example, we do not see a manifest state interest in insuring that high school students are able to take a course in science fiction as part of their English curriculum. Yet, in many cases that is the sort of course that seems to accompany increased size. Still further, relatively few pupils take advantage of these sometimes tangential offerings. Thus, it is not clear, even in those cases where increased size would lead to a broadening of programs, that such broadening is always desirable or that many students take advantage of it.

We conclude that no certain improvements in either equity or efficiency result from school reorganization. This is not to say, however, that such improvements are impossible. The point is that the benefits of reorganization are not nearly so dependable as its advocates would have citizens believe. At the same time, there may be important educational and social costs involved.

In regard to the reorganization process itself, we found that citizens' objections to mergers are substantive and important. The loss of an important community institution, the potential inequities that result from the way ballots are counted, the handling of debts and educational liabilities of combining districts, the fact that reorganization's benefits accrue unequally across merging school systems, and the uncertainties concerning governance are not trivial matters. Yet, we found evidence that they have not been treated with the consideration and candor they deserve. We concluded that this was primarily a result of the State's underlying belief that it must "sell" mergers to reluctant and relatively ignorant communities.

Similarly, and as a result of the same belief, we found the process of conducting "feasibility studies" disingenuous. These studies perpetrate a serious disservice to local districts. They often seem to have been conducted by persons with preconceived notions that reorganization is desirable and without knowledge of the research literature of their own profession. Hence they give little or no attention to potential negative consequences of consolidation.

We also found that these negative consequences are far from hypothetical. In the districts we studied negative effects could be discerned, sometimes years after a reorganization had taken place. In some of these cases we could not help wondering if the continuing turmoil, ill-will and disruption were worth any benefits which may have been derived.

In light of all this, we conclude that artificially encouraged school district reorganization is not an effective mechanism for dealing with the problems of small rural schools.[34] However, we do not conclude that it should cease to be an option for local school districts. Rather, we recognize that reorganization can have merit as an organizational alternative, but conclude that it is not so patently superior to all alternatives that it warrants the emphasis currently placed upon it by the State. Instead, we recommend a State policy that broadens the alternatives available and makes possible their unbiased consideration. Detailed recommendations designed to achieve this goal appear in Chapter 6. We turn now to an analysis of some of these alternatives.

Notes

1. State Education Department, the University of the State of New York, *Better Education Through School District Reorganization*. (Albany, N.Y.: Author, nd).
2. Charles E. Davis, "If We Can Haul the Milk, We Can Haul the Kids: A Personalized History of School District Reorganization in New York State," (Ithaca, New York: Unpublished manuscript, Department of Education, Cornell University, 1986). The extraordinary title of this paper by Davis, himself a former District Superintendent, seemingly exemplifies the attitude toward reorganization held by this influential group of educators.
3. State Education Department, *Better Education*, p. 11.
4. University of the State of New York, *Master Plan for School District Reorganization in New York State* (Revised). (Albany, New York: The State Education Department, 1958) p. 11.
5. University of the State of New York, *Master Plan*.
6. These figures obviously depend on assumptions regarding interest rates, constant aid ratios, etc. Rather than make up these assumptions ourselves, we have drawn the illustration from an example provided by the State itself. See, The University of the State of New York, The State Education Department, Bureau of School District Reorganization, "Planning for the Future Through School District Reorganization," (Albany, NY: Author, 1983).
7. University of the State of New York, "Planning for the Future," 1983. This is one of those places where the law differs according to the type of reorganization. Procedures for annexations, for example, differ from those described. What we describe is the process typically followed for centralization, which are of principal concern to us here.
8. This number represents a small fraction of the number of school districts merged into larger entities during this century. Between 1914 and 1957, more than 8,000 school districts were combined into just 503 central schools (University of the State of New York, *Master Plan*, p.7.)
9. All tables are derived from the State Education Department, Division of Educational Testing, *Reference Group Summaries: 1983-84*. (Albany, N.Y.: Author, nd).
10. We also examined the relationship of size with PEP scores *within* the category "small central." When we did this we found that the very smallest school districts, i.e., those operating high schools of less than 500 pupils, tended to report lower scores than larger districts within that category. Thus, it is possible that pupils in very small schools are at a disadvantage. However, even in the very small schools, PEP score differences were relatively inconsequential.

11. Scott Bilow, "The Size of School Districts: Economic and Psychological Perspectives," (Ithaca, New York: Unpublished manuscript, Department of Education, Cornell University, 1986).

12. Phil Schoggen, "Student Voluntary Participation and High School Size." Paper presented to the American Psychological Association meeting in Toronto, Canada in August, 1984, pp. 16-17.

13. For more details on this study see David H. Monk, "Secondary School Size and Curricular Comprehensiveness." (Unpublished manuscript, Department of Education, Cornell University, 1986.) A revised version of this paper will appear in a forthcoming issue of *The Economics of Education Review.*

14. For example, we selected all of the school districts in New York State with enrollments equal to 100 pupils in grades 9- 12. If the number of districts with precisely 100 pupils was smaller than 10, we broadened the enrollment level to 99-101 and added these districts to the group. The net result of this method is 10 districts with enrollment levels in grades 9-12 that are very close to the selected target levels. In all, our data are drawn from 100 districts, 10 each at enrollment levels of 100, 200, 300, 400, 500, 1000, 1500, 2000, 2500 and 3000.

15. Most of the growth in the number of subject areas is accounted for by increases in the number of foreign languages offered. (The State treats each foreign language as a separate subject area.) When we treated all foreign languages as if they were a single subject area, the number of subject areas ranged between a low of 8.1 in the smallest high schools to 9.5 in high schools with 2,500 pupils. A step-like relationship was revealed following this adjustment. The steps occurred at the 100 to 200 pupil levels (moving from 8.1 to 8.9) and again at the 1,000 to 1,500 levels (moving from 8.7 to 9.3).

16. For example, more than 70 percent of the science courses found in the larger (>400 pupils) but not in the smaller (<400) schools were never offered by more than 20 percent of the larger districts.

17. Arthur F. Powell, Eleanor Farrar and David K. Cohen, *The Shopping Mall High School.* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, Co., 1985).

18. A singleton is a course that is offered at only one time in a school's schedule. It is a single-section course.

19. The incidence of singletons is a crude measure of course inaccessibility. A superior measure would adjust for the number of times courses offered at the same hour as the singleton are offered at other periods in the schedule. We are indebted to Kate S. Woodward and Don Hickman for bringing this point to our attention.

20. Bilow, "The Size of School Districts."

21. University of the State of New York, *Master Plan*, p. 11.

22. James Guthrie, "Organizational Scale and School Success," *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis*, 1,1 (1979), p. 21.

23. Bilow, "The Size of School Districts."

24. The State Education Department, *Better Education*, p. 8.

25. Davis, "If We Can Haul the Milk."

26. Kate S. Woodward, *The Impact of Reorganization on School District Governance and Political Participation in a Centralized Rural New York State School District*. (Ithaca, New York: Unpublished doctoral dissertation, Cornell University, 1986.)

27. Patrick Galvin, "Community Participation and School District Reorganization," (Ithaca, New York: Unpublished manuscript, Department of Education, Cornell University, 1986.)

28. Woodward, *The Impact of Reorganization*.

29. The withdrawal of this district is further evidence regarding our point that disparity in wealth is an issue not properly dealt with by current reorganization procedures.

30. On this latter point, there is incontrovertible evidence that the SED treated the petition drive as something of a *fait accompli*: The Commissioner of Education signed the announcement of the reorganization plan when the petition drive had just begun and two weeks before the petition itself was delivered to Albany.

31. "Pushed" is a strong word, and it is deliberately chosen. We mean to denote by it the notion of vigorous, active pressure to compel a desired action over the opposition of others. We acknowledge that some State officials do not think of themselves as "pushing" reorganization and object to our use of the term.

32. In fact, over 20 years ago the New York State Citizens Committee for the Public Schools concluded that 98% of the reorganizations required by the 1947 *Master Plan* had been accomplished. See, The State Education Department of New York, *School District Organization and Procedures in District Reorganization in New York State*, (Albany, N.Y.: The State Education Department, Author, nd).

33. It is interesting to note that other nations have worried that schools easily become too large. Norway, for example, a nation with very high levels of educational attainment, has legislated that no school can enroll *more than* 450 students, a very small enrollment by New York State standards. Jonathan P. Sher, *Heavy Meddle: A Critique of the North Carolina Department of Public Instructions Plan to Mandate School District Mergers Throughout the State*. North Carolina's School Boards Association, April 1986.

34. Sher puts another perspective on this whole matter by noting how peripheral the matter of school size is to the national debate over education. As everyone knows, in the last few years numerous influential books have appeared describing what is wrong with U.S. schools and what must be done to improve them. With the exception of John Goodlad's impressive work, *A Place Called School*, none of these books even mentions school size as an important aspect of educational quality, and Goodlad argues for making schools smaller. See: Sher, *Heavy Meddle*.

Chapter 5

The Folklore of Sharing and Technology: Alternatives to Reorganization

In this Chapter we explore alternatives to traditional reorganization. We are particularly interested in sharing that takes place among separately organized school districts and innovative uses of educational technologies. Our discussion of sharing is divided into two sections. The first examines sharing made possible by Boards of Cooperative Education Services (BOCES); the second considers sharing outside of this structure.

SHARED SERVICES

Sharing Within The BOCES Organizational Structure

Sharing is believed by many to offer a means of solving the problems faced by small rural schools. It is looked at as a middle ground that permits districts to retain their separate organizational identities and at the same time engineer increases in size that lead to gains in efficiency and equity.

There is extensive experience with shared educational services in New York State. Thanks to the Boards of Cooperative Education Services that were established in 1948, New York State is one of the national leaders in sharing services among separately organized school districts.

BOCES have been closely regulated by the State. The concern has been that the BOCES could interfere with the success of efforts to reorganize small school districts. The thinking was that if a small district could offer a comprehensive program utilizing BOCES, it would have less incentive to reorganize.

Thus, BOCES presented the State with a dilemma. On one hand, it wished to encourage the use of shared services. On the other, it wished to prevent the BOCES from substituting for district reorganization. This dilemma was resolved by providing financial incentives for sharing but restricting them to those courses and services judged outside a district's core or basic educational offering. These nonbasic courses typically came from the vocational and special education areas of the curricula.

The State did not go so far as to enjoin districts from offering core programs on a shared basis. There is nothing in the BOCES law that prevents shared basic courses. Until recently the only difference between a shared basic course and a shared nonbasic one is that the latter is eligible for additional State aid. Although it is true that there never has been anything in the law to prevent districts from sharing basic academic offerings through BOCES, that kind of sharing has never been widespread.

In contrast, there is widespread use of the BOCES structure to offer vocational and special education services, in part because of the financial incentives. These incentives have been criticized on the grounds that sharing is supposed to generate its own savings--savings that should, in themselves, be sufficient incentive for the districts to enter collaborative arrangements. According to this view, the additional State aid, often called BOCES aid, is tantamount to "double-dipping" by the school districts. For the reasons we explain below, we do not accept these criticisms of financial incentives for shared programs.

The distinction between core or basic and other kinds of courses is inherently problematic. Who is to say that a vocational education course is not part of a district's core offering, while a mathematics course is? The criteria for making these judgments have never been clearly specified, and one of the consequences has been a longstanding series of disputes between individual BOCES and the State Education Department regarding what is and is not aidable as a BOCES service.

These restrictions on the use of the BOCES structure to offer core courses were relaxed recently; it is now possible for two or more districts within a BOCES to cooperate and receive BOCES aid for offering core courses such as English or mathematics. This ought to be good news for the very small rural districts. We saw in Chapters 3 and 4 that they are less likely than larger districts to offer comprehensive academic curriculums. The willingness of the State to subsidize academic courses through BOCES provides unprecedented opportunities for these districts to expand their academic offerings. However, the response of districts to these opportunities, regardless of their size or ruralness, has been minimal.

It is important for us to understand more about this reluctance. We need to know why small districts are refusing financial incentives to offer academic courses through the BOCES organizational structure. The answers to our questions about this are reported below and throw light on small rural districts' dissatisfaction with the entire BOCES structure. With a clear idea of BOCES' shortcomings (at least those that exist in the eyes of small rural districts) we can gain insight into reforms that would work to their advantage.

The most fundamental problem, judging from how often it was mentioned in our interviews, is the feeling among low enrollment districts that they lack control over the BOCES operation. This feeling of being out of control manifested itself in different ways.

For example, there is concern over what courses are offered. Some claim that BOCES are not attentive to the course needs of the small member districts. The argument goes something like this: BOCES programs are "enrollment driven," and this results in a strong desire to avoid offering small classes.[1] The BOCES administration prefers to offer courses that appeal either to its larger districts or to many of its smaller districts. A course that two small districts wish to offer cooperatively receives a low priority within the BOCES because it is not likely to generate a large enrollment. This argument is relevant for our purposes, since academic courses such as calculus are the kind small numbers of low enrollment districts are likely to offer cooperatively.

The counter argument goes like this: BOCES is indifferent to course enrollments. If two very small districts wish to offer a calculus course through BOCES, they are welcome to do so and will be charged the cost of offering the course. The BOCES aid they receive will be paid on the basis of this cost.

Since the course is not likely to be large, the cooperating districts must anticipate that the per-pupil costs will be higher for this course than for an otherwise equivalent course that attracts a larger enrollment. This is not because BOCES favor larger courses. Rather it is because there is no escaping the fact that on a per-pupil basis more is spent to offer a smaller than a larger course. The advantage to the participating districts is that offering the calculus class through BOCES ought to cost less on a per-pupil basis than it would cost to offer the class alone. By working through BOCES, there is additional transportation cost (either for the teacher or the students) but this is partially offset by gains in enrollment and additional BOCES aid paid to the districts.

While the second argument is technically correct, it is wrong to dismiss lightly the feeling at the local level that BOCES are insensitive to the needs of the small school districts. The offerings of BOCES are geared toward the large courses that appeal to the bigger districts or to greater numbers of the smaller districts. BOCES are not accustomed to thinking in terms of offering low enrollment courses to a small number of districts. Moreover, there is nothing inherent in the concept of shared services that prevents the subsidization of high-cost low-enrollment courses by lower-cost, high-enrollment ones. Even so, this kind of subsidization is unusual.

The small rural districts also feel they lack control over the content of the courses offered. If five or six districts contract to offer a course, any single district's influence on course content or choice of instructor is reduced. This relative lack of control seems to be a special concern in academic areas. The reason may be related the fact that academic offerings are the last ones remaining largely under local control. Influence over vocational and special education has already been lost, in part, to BOCES. People may guard control of academic offerings with special vigilance because it is all they have left.

Alternatively, the reason may have to do with the more sensitive nature of some academic curricula. Within English, for example, decisions are made about what literature to require students to read. Communities do not always agree about what counts as objectionable literature, and this may generate a special interest in maintaining local control over academic courses.

There is also concern over the dual nature of the role played by the District Superintendent. District (i.e., BOCES) Superintendents are, in part, the field representatives of the State Education Department. By offering increasingly large portions of their programs through the BOCES structure, local districts fear that they will lose autonomy. Thus, in addition to surrendering control to their neighboring districts, there is concern over losing control to the State in the person of the District (BOCES) Superintendent.

Next, there is the need to accept the BOCES salary schedule. Many of the small rural districts offer teacher salaries substantially below what is offered in the local BOCES. When these districts participate in BOCES programs, the BOCES salary schedule applies. Even with the additional State aid that accompanies participation, these districts find themselves participating in what they consider to be very expensive programs. Two neighboring districts could cooperate in a program and hire a teacher at a salary similar to what each district pays its own teachers. This would ease the financial strain in the districts and would avoid morale problems that arise when teachers working together at the same site are paid substantially different salaries.

And, finally, there is the distance to BOCES facilities. Although it may be possible in theory to offer BOCES programs at remote sites, in practice BOCES offer large portions of their program in central locations. If a choice has to be made between using BOCES to offer a program at five sites, each of which involves two districts, and a program at a single site that involves ten districts, BOCES favor the latter over the former approach. The latter structure may indeed be more efficient, but this efficiency exists in a narrow sense, and the net result may be no program at all for students in the more distant school districts. Feelings of lost control can outweigh alleged efficiency advantages.

We will not dwell on the strengths of the BOCES concept. For our purposes it is sufficient to note that sharing through BOCES enhances both efficiency and equity; that some good things can be said about the dual role played by District (i.e., BOCES) Superintendents; and that BOCES facilitate a degree of regional sharing and planning that would not occur otherwise.[2] Nevertheless, small rural districts are not making extensive use of BOCES for academic programs. The explanations they offer for their resistance are instructive and suggest that BOCES are not viable mechanisms for providing shared academic curricula.

We turn next to an alternative form of sharing that has received increasing amounts of attention in New York State.

Interdistrict Sharing

A variation on sharing has emerged among New York State school districts that can be viewed as a reaction to the perceived disadvantages associated with relying heavily on BOCES. This approach involves the voluntary cooperation of two or more neighboring school districts in the sharing of a program or resource. Our analysis has revealed that this kind of interdistrict sharing has been discussed in the educational administration literature for at least the past 30 years.[3]

In his review of this literature, our associate found that most of the published research on this topic consists of glowing reports about sharing's potential for solving the problems facing districts in periods of fiscal stress. Missing from this literature are evaluations about the short-term, not to mention the long-term, disadvantages of shared programming. The following quote is representative.

> The advantages are obvious, the only barrier to successful sharing programs is the willingness of the school district manager to organize them.[4]

A District Superintendent from New York State recently made a similar point:

> When one considers the possibilities of interdistrict cooperation there seems to be no limit. The [only] limits are the community's resistance to this kind of effort and the willingness of the staff and people involved to be creative and ingenious enough to establish such programs.[5]

It is puzzling that, despite these testimonials, interdistrict sharing has not become substantially more widespread. The ideas described in the articles of the 1960s about sharing are almost identical to those given today. Thus, despite the access to claims about the advantages of sharing as well as the pressure brought to bear by escalating school costs, school managers do not appear to have become more widely involved with inter-district sharing.[6]

We believe a similar pattern of limited use exists in New York State. In 1982, the State Education Department conducted a survey of sharing taking place outside of the BOCES structure. Approximately 30 responses were received, most of which described sharing in non-instructional areas of the school program.[7] With only a few exceptions, New York State districts were not sharing things like courses or athletic teams. Sharing more commonly involved people (such as business managers) or things (such as snow plows and dump trucks). A more recent follow-up survey of sharing activities generated even fewer replies.

It is important to understand why interdistrict sharing has not become more widespread and why it has tended to involve noninstructional areas of schools' programs. Is the limited use related more to a lack of initiative or imagination on the part of administrators, as the first quote suggests? Or is it due to a combination of lack of interest on the part of administrators and the communities they serve as the second quote suggests? Or are the problems more fundamental, and if they are can the State take steps to facilitate the use of this promising but apparently untried organizational option?

We sought answers to these questions by reviewing the business administration literature on sharing[8] and by conducting a small case study of two school districts in New York State that operate a comprehensive interdistrict sharing program.

We conclude that sharing among school districts is often more difficult to accomplish than the testimonials suggest and that the difficulties stem from a number of identifiable structural sources. In other words, it is wrong to generalize about the ease or difficulty of sharing programs. Some shared programs are more difficult to initiate and maintain than are others. Moreover, identifiable factors contribute to the ease or difficulty of sharing programs. We discuss these factors below.

Stability. Unstable school districts find it difficult to offer joint programs. There are several areas in which stability is important. It helps to work with the same individuals over time. This is true for both administrators and teachers. Teacher and administrator turnover can seriously interfere with sharing efforts. It also helps if the interests of students remain stable. When student enrollments fluctuate widely from year to year, it is difficult to maintain a shared offering.

Consensus. Sharing proceeds most smoothly when there is consensus among the participants. As a rule, consensus is fostered by reducing the number of people involved, by making it easier for those involved to communicate between themselves, and by avoiding controversial topics.

Evenness in the distribution of benefits. The business administration literature discusses at great length the importance of mutual benefits for the long-term survival of sharing arrangements. This call for mutuality is accompanied by a sobering discussion of how difficult it is to balance benefits and costs of sharing agreements across organizations. According to this literature, sharing works best when the organizations exchange programs that are essential and for which there is no substitute.[9] The chances of two contiguous school districts each having a program that the other finds essential and unobtainable elsewhere seems remote. In our mini-case study, numerous comments were made about the one-sided nature of the sharing agreement.

The problem is made even more serious by the fact that costs and benefits are distributed internally among the actors within the school districts. Suppose two districts agree to share and their total benefits and costs are equal. Evenness at the organizational level does not mean that the benefits will be distributed evenly within the districts. For example, a handful of students may capture all of the benefits, while the costs may be imposed disproportionately on individual teachers.

This type of unevenness generates difficulties that can interfere with the success of a shared program. We saw evidence of this in our study of interactive telecommunications. Teachers who were not using the system resented the extra attention given to teachers who were. Of course, it is possible in theory to compensate those within the organization who are bearing the costs of the shared program, but this only adds to the complexity and makes successful administration more difficult.

Competition. Sharing programs can generate competition among the cooperating units. We saw an example of this in the mini-case study. Two cooperating districts shared athletic teams and were able to offer a larger number of sports. These new sports competed with existing sports for the student athletes. This increased competition between the sports and generated difficulties between the districts.

Additional expense. When districts decide about offering a program, they have three choices. The program can be offered by the district operating alone; it can be shared with a neighboring district; or it can be not offered at all. The advantage of the sharing arrangement is that the cost is lower than the cost of offering the program alone. But, the least expensive of the options is to not offer the course at all. If a district is moving from not offering the course to offering it on a shared basis, additional expenses will be incurred.

Thus, from the district's perspective, sharing a course can generate additional expense. Savings exist only in a relative sense and never show up on a balance sheet. These additional expenses contribute to the difficulty of administering shared programs.

Implications for Small Rural Schools

Our associate's conclusions about the difficulty of offering shared programs have important implications for our study of small districts. Virtually every one of the sources of difficulty he identifies is likely to exist in small districts. Recall from Chapter 3 that small rural schools seem to face considerable turnover among both administrators and teachers. This contributes to instability, and instability contributes to the difficulty of mounting a successful shared program.

Moreover, in small schools, enrollment levels are,by definition, low, and this contributes to fluctuations in enrollment levels from one year to the next. Larger schools benefit from the law of large numbers and its smoothing effect on enrollment fluctuations over time. Enrollment fluctuations count as an additional source of instability which makes it difficult to plan shared offerings.

We also learned in Chapter 3 that small rural schools have gaps in their curricula that do not exist in larger districts. It follows that these districts will be interested in offering fundamental parts of their schools' curricula on a shared basis. Small districts do not have the luxury of offering peripheral services that touch people's lives in only indirect ways. Rather, they must try to share basic offerings that touch large numbers of people in direct ways.

In small districts there will tend to be fewer people involved, and this ought to help build consensus. However, distances among the participating districts are likely to be large and this, in turn, will interfere with consensus building.

All districts are likely to have trouble establishing mutually advantageous sharing arrangements. We see no unique burden for the small rural districts in this regard. But there is reason to believe that competition will be more troublesome in small rural districts than elsewhere. Rural communities can develop fierce rivalries that stand in the way of effective sharing. Indeed, one of the advantages of the BOCES structure is that it is relatively "identity-less." When a district relies upon BOCES to provide a program, it is not forced to admit that the next-door district is better in some respect.

Finally, there are additional expenses. To the extent that sharing is used to solve one of the most pressing problems in the small school—missed educational opportunities—it will generate additional expenses. In other districts, where course offerings are already in place, sharing may actually save the districts money. Sharing is likely to be most expensive in the smallest districts—which may in fact have the greatest needs.

In light of these sources of difficulty and their widespread nature, particularly among small rural school districts, it is not surprising that sharing is so limited. Indeed, what is more surprising is the strength of the testimonials that crowd the educational administration literature.

There is, however, some reason to be optimistic about the promise offered by sharing. We have been struck not only by the magnitude of the difficulties but also by how varied the level of difficulty can be even within a single partnership. It is easier to share a dump truck than a foreign language course. In the case of the dump truck, the number of actors involved is small, there is widespread consensus about what dump trucks can and should accomplish, competition is minimal, and there is mutual advantage. In contrast, the foreign language exchange involves a large number of actors (students, teachers, parents, administrators, bus drivers, etc.), consensus need not exist about what language to teach, the selection of the instructor and instructional methods may be problematic, and there can be an implied message—derived from the competition between the schools—that the sending school is in some ways inferior to the receiving school.

We conclude that the mechanism designed to facilitate the dump truck kind of sharing needs to be different from the mechanism designed to facilitate the sharing of courses and other services that generate difficulties. The former lends itself to informal arrangements. The latter does not. Rather, the sharing agreement needs to be made formal and in some fundamental sense institutionalized. Formal agreements, if not contracts, need to be made among participating districts. Moreover, these contracts need to be attentive to the sources of difficulty our associate identified. Particular attention needs to be paid to the goal of establishing mutual benefit. One-sided sharing agreements are not likely to survive. Attention must also be given to the distribution of benefits and costs among the teachers, students, and other actors in the participating districts. Sensitivity to these matters can go a long way toward increasing the incidence of sharing that involves more than peripheral noninstructional services.

We believe the State can play an important role in helping districts negotiate these formal sharing agreements and contracts. As the State gains experience working with districts, it will be in a unique position to provide the technical assistance the districts need to realize the considerable potential interdistrict sharing offers. In Chapter 6 we describe steps the State can take to facilitate the use of this important organizational alternative.

INSTRUCTIONAL TECHNOLOGIES

Instructional technologies are not, strictly speaking, organizational alternatives for small rural schools. Instead, they provide alternative ways of offering instruction which often involve the cooperation of other organizational units. Instructional technology can therefore be thought of as a special application of the interdistrict sharing organizational alternative.

We identified two basic forms of technology: instruction that involves the use of computers and telecommunications that vary in the degree to which they are interactive. The basic question we sought to answer was whether these new forms of technology offer solutions to the problems we identified in small rural schools.

Our strategy for answering this question was two-fold. First, we reviewed the available literature on computer instruction and interactive telecommunications; second, we conducted on-site visits to a number of places in New York State where various innovative uses of technology are taking place. These pilot programs were not always focused on small rural schools, but we were especially attentive to what these programs could offer the smaller and more rural schools in New York State.

Computers in the Schools

There is a voluminous literature describing current uses of computers in schools.[10] Much of it is descriptive and has the same hortatory quality that characterizes the literature on interdistrict sharing. Our associate distilled these published descriptions into an idealized view of what a computer program in a small rural school district would include. He used this vision of the ideal to develop a "report card" to evaluate the use of computers in small rural districts.

Next, he applied this report card to the actual uses of computers we encountered in our case studies. Our associate's conclusion is that in most of our case studies, the districts are not making adequate use of computer capabilities. Many of the districts we studied have an odd collection of incompatible machines. Instructional programs typically lack central coherence and are too dependent on a few teachers who happen to have computer interests. These teachers tend to come and go, probably to a greater degree than other rural teachers because of their computer-enhanced marketability.

We also found that virtually all of the subject matter software is designed to complement the instruction provided by teachers. We have no quarrel with this type of software, but so long as courses of study rely upon the teacher as the primary, if not exclusive, source of instruction, computers will have little impact on solving the problems of the small rural school. Personnel problems are a central source of the inadequacies of small districts. In Chapter 3 we discussed the recruitment and retention problems of small rural schools as well as the tendency for teachers in these schools to be spread over large areas of the secondary curriculum. If computers merely complement rather than substitute for teachers, their potential for solving these schools' problems is limited indeed.

We are not advocating the replacement of teachers with machines. Rather, we seek ways for computers to contribute in substantive rather than peripheral ways to the instructional program. For this to happen, the computers will have to do some actual teaching and go beyond their more typical use as sophisticated sources of reinforcement and drill. If computer software can supply subject matter expertise, the tendency for teachers in the small schools to be spread so thinly over different subjects and subject areas could become a less serious liability.

However, we see few signs that instructional software is evolving in this direction. The much more common direction is for the software to be helper to the instruction provided by the teacher. There are two explanations for this. First, there are market problems. The need for software that substitutes for hired teacher resources is greater in small rural districts than elsewhere. Small rural districts face greater difficulties staffing even their basic academic offering and would find this kind of software especially helpful. But very small rural school districts (i.e., those with enrollments below 500 pupils) serve a very small proportion of students in New York State as well as elsewhere and provide a very small number of instructional settings. Hence, there simply is not much of a market for a product that speaks directly to the unique needs of a small segment of the schooling industry.

The second reason stems from the interests of teachers in preserving their employment. Increased reliance on embodied human resources in the form of instructional software would reduce the demand for teachers. The net result of an infusion of teacher-substituting forms of technology would be an increase in average class size and a concomitant drop in the demand for teachers. Perhaps some teachers would move into the software production industry (and could find themselves handsomely compensated), but the fact remains that the number of teachers would drop.

Organized teachers are understandably concerned about such a possibility, and conceivably would take steps to postpone or prevent it. We believe the adverse effects of this kind of software on teachers' employment is more likely to arise in large urban districts. In the small rural ones, the number of teachers is less likely to be reduced. For example, as things stand now, in a small school there might be a single language teacher who offers a single foreign language. With the advent of software that can substitute for the teacher, this same teacher might be able to provide instruction in several different foreign languages. The teacher would still be employed; indeed, the teacher might even do more teaching. What would change is the quality and breadth of the instruction.

There are also questions about whether software can replace teachers. Certainly existing software shows little sign of even partially replacing teachers in the classroom. But this state of affairs may exist because of the two reasons we list above. In other words, there has been very little market for this kind of software. In contrast, the demand for drill and practice software has been steady and strong. Software companies are responsive to market conditions and have produced a wealth of material that is designed to preserve the existing role of the teacher in the classroom.

In light of this, the inability of existing software to substitute for teachers is hardly surprising, but it says little about the potential computers offer for accomplishing precisely this result. We conclude that for the sake of the small rural schools more effort needs to be devoted to developing software with these capabilities. We also conclude that the private market is incapable of responding to this need and that the State needs to play a more central role in the actual development of instructional software.[11]

What this means is that the current state of computers and computer software has little to offer to the solution of problems faced by small rural schools. That is, this form of technology does not offer any more to small rural schools than it does to other schools. We are also inclined toward a jaundiced view of what computers have accomplished in any kind of school; however, we remain optimistic about the potential computer-based instruction offers. The challenge, of course, is to realize this potential, and this we believe will require intervention by the State.

Interactive Telecommunications

Distance education involving interactive telecommunications is a rapidly developing technology that is receiving increasing amounts of attention within New York State. The technology comes in several varieties. The earliest efforts involved one- and two-way radio transmissions. These efforts frequently took place in remote areas of developing nations.[12] More recent and sophisticated efforts have introduced television into the technology. Some of these involve the transmission of blackboard images (the so-called talking or magic blackboard), while others transmit simultaneous "live" images of teachers and students.

The problem with studying interactive telecommunications is that there are very few experiences at hand. In one of our case studies, districts are engaged in a technically sophisticated two-way interactive television pilot project. There are three sites, one of which is the source of the lesson. The teacher is placed at this site with a class. The lesson is transmitted live to the students in classrooms at the two remote sites. Students at these remote sites can see the teacher and hear classmates at the transmission site. The teacher can see and hear the students at the remote sites. The net result comes close to simulating a live classroom with the sum of the students in all three sites

Within limits, everyone can see and hear everyone else. There is even a capability to transmit close-up shots of homework papers and the like. The classrooms are also connected by a courier system so that written work can be handed in to the teacher for correction. Unfortunately, this is an ongoing pilot project that is impossible to evaluate in summative terms.[13] Even so, it is possible to share impressions.

It is clear that a high level of commitment is required among the participating school districts. Before joining this project each of these districts operated different yearly and daily schedules. They did not all start the school day at the same time; their passing times between class periods in the secondary schools were different; they had different schedules for lunch; and they did not all observe the same holidays. Agreements had to be reached on all of these matters before a common means of sharing classes across the districts could be achieved.

Common decisions also had to be made about what courses were going to be taught. This decision interacted with decisions that needed to be made about how to supervise students at the remote sites. The districts realized that if a fully qualified teacher were required to be in each of the remote sites, the benefits of the technology would be lost. What would be the point of incurring all the costs of transmitting a lesson if a fully qualified teacher were going to be present? The districts were also unwilling to station a teacher who was not qualified to teach the subject but who could supervise the students. This would solve some of the problems which motivated the use of the technology but would still require the use of a costly resource to provide what in essence would be custodial care.

The districts also refused to assign a teacher aide to the classes to provide supervision. Rather, they agreed to forego formal on-site supervision and rely upon the supervision of the teacher providing the lesson combined with informal periodic checks on site to make sure order was maintained. This arrangement led the district officials to restrict the initial classes to highly motivated students who supposedly would not require close supervision. Thus, most of the classes offered during the first year of the project were at advanced levels and were aimed at academically motivated students.

For scheduling reasons this proved to be impossible to achieve for one of the classes taught, and the districts agreed to offer a non-Regents English class on the interactive system. All of the reports we heard testified to the success of this class. The school district officials were much heartened by this, since it suggests that the benefits of interactive remote instruction need not be limited to the advanced self-motivated students.

Agreements also had to be reached about who would teach the courses. Not all teachers were interested in teaching on interactive television systems. Moreover, those willing to use the system were not necessarily those whose expertise was in the greatest demand. Finally, in the interest of making the system mutually advantageous for the participating districts and for the sake of reducing competition, it was important to have some courses originate from each of the participating schools. The sharing works best, as we argued earlier, when all the partners contribute something of value.

Not surprisingly, the hardware in use was prone to malfunctions. These districts were making use of a highly sophisticated and relatively new technology. As time passes and the hardware is refined, the problem of down-time is likely to be reduced. Even so, the time during which the system was not operational posed some unprecedented challenges for teachers. In normal class settings an interruption in instruction occurs when a teacher is absent or the school is closed; all members of the class are affected in the same way. In contrast, when a transmission system malfunctions only those students at the remote sites are incapable of receiving the instruction. Should the teacher not teach the class at the transmission site so that the class stays together? Or should the lesson proceed on the grounds that the students at the transmission site should not be held back? If the latter course is followed, how will the students at the remote sites be kept abreast of the class's progress? Perhaps tapes of some kind could be used. The widespread use of this technology raises important and new logistical questions regarding the delivery of instruction.

The hardware used by these districts is also very costly. Important questions can be asked about whether it is worth the considerable cost involved to transmit the visual images of a teacher along with the audio signal. Elsewhere in New York State experiments are under way wherein a two-way audio system is complemented by a common blackboard-like device. In some respects these efforts are even more ambitious than the two-way television experiment we have been describing. This is true even though the hardware in these audio experiments is less technically sophisticated than that in use with the television experiment.

The two-way television experiment is based on the idea that we need to use technology to simulate the reality of classrooms. The goal is to make the shared instruction as much like a "regular" classroom as possible. The underlying premise is that regular classroom instruction is good and needs to be simulated. In contrast, the experiments that rely on audio are willing to change the mode of instruction to suit the reality that all of the students cannot be present in the same room at the same time. The underlying premise is that the "regular" classroom mode of instruction is not so good that it deserves to be simulated regardless of the cost.

The absence of the video signal in these audio experiments requires the teachers to develop new instructional strategies. Whether these strategies will work is an unanswered question. The school officials involved with these audio experiments voiced concern over the tendency they observed for the teachers to try to use the same old teaching strategies with the new system. There was widespread agreement that this would not be successful. Efforts were under way to provide inservice training for the participating teachers. Time must pass before we will know whether these teachers can make the adjustment and develop new and successful strategies for providing live instruction using the less expensive two-way audio connections with their students.

The extra ambition involved in these efforts to do without the video signal is impressive. It makes sense to explore ways in which the delivery of instruction can be adapted to our limited technological capabilities. It may turn out to be very short sighted to attempt to approach the problem from the opposite direction and make technology a slave to an entrenched and unchangeable means of providing instruction.

The final observation we will make has to do with the internal impact of the two-way television project on the faculty of one participating district. In our interviews with the teachers not involved with the project there emerged a sense of irritation over the amount of extra attention the involved teachers were receiving. These feelings were exacerbated by the fact that the project is innovative and has received large amounts of attention throughout the State. Even so, these feelings are indicative of the internal distribution problems sharing can create. The benefits of the interactive television project are not distributed evenly within the participating districts. This is true for students as well as teachers. Moreover, there are costs that must be reckoned with. These are not insurmountable problems, but they do contribute to the difficulty attached to making interactive television, or any kind of technology that connects separately organized schools, a long- term success.

Interactive distance education is at its heart a shared program. Moreover, it is a shared program that entails virtually all of the difficulties our associate identified in his analysis of interdistrict sharing. These programs, if they are to solve the problems facing small rural schools must deal with important areas of the curriculum about which school districts are likely to disagree. They will involve large numbers of people among whom consensus will be difficult to develop. Distance will be involved, and this will add to the difficulty of achieving consensus. There will also be complicated distributions of benefits and costs both across and within the participating units that will be difficult to balance.

Despite these difficulties, we remain impressed with the promise offered by interactive technologies. The fact that it is possible to simulate a "regular" classroom with students located 30 or more miles apart is an impressive feat that bodes well for education in rural areas. Moreover, it may be possible to adapt classroom instruction so that it is less dependent on video images, and this will make distance education much more cost effective in the short run. We are especially optimistic about the gains to be had from joining computer technologies with the interactive audio systems.

CONCLUSIONS

Sharing resources and programs are important mechanisms for broadening and enriching instructional services in small rural schools. But the level of difficulty associated with initiating and maintaining sharing arrangements varies widely. The kinds of arrangements necessary to broaden and enrich the instructional services of small rural schools is especially difficult to initiate and maintain.

Financial incentives are necessary to encourage the kind of cooperative arrangements that address many of the problems of small rural school districts. The BOCES structure, even with the existing financial incentives, is not likely to succeed in facilitating the sharing of core academic offerings. Neither are the current ad hoc and voluntary arrangements among contiguous districts likely to succeed in significantly broadening the course offerings of a large number of low enrollment rural school systems. Thus, the State should take steps to institutionalize the sharing of courses and services at the sub-BOCES level—i.e., among individual contiguous or nearby school districts.

On the matter of technological solutions to the problems of size, we find that small rural schools are not making full use of existing computer technologies. But they are certainly not unique in this regard. Even were they to do so, however, current computer technology is unlikely to contribute substantially to the solution of the more pressing problems in small rural schools. In large part, its inadequacy is a consequence of the available software. Existing instructional software is simply not capable of addressing the more fundamental problems facing small rural schools trying to deliver quality instruction to students. At heart these problems concern personnel. As long as the private market, which produces most instructional computer programs, continues to assume the presence of a full-time teacher, the potential of computer technology to solve the problems of low-enrollment schools is likely to remain just that—potential.

Interactive instructional television and related technologies are a promising but largely untried solution to some of the problems of size. The failure of a large number of school districts to experiment with these instructional systems is primarily due to the fact that they are inherently among the most difficult of shared programs to initiate and maintain.

In the next chapter we draw together the findings we have discussed in Chapters 3, 4 and 5 and set forth a series of policy recommendations.

Notes

1. See David H. Monk, "Secondary School Size and Curricular Comprehensiveness," (Ithaca, New York: Unpublished manuscript, Department of Education, Cornell University, 1986), for more on this aversion to small class offerings.
2. Obviously there is much more that might be said about BOCES as a mechanism for inter-district sharing. While a thorough study of these units would be useful, as we noted earlier, it would have been well beyond the scope of this research
3. Patrick Galvin, "Sharing Among Separately Organized School Districts: Promise and Pitfalls" (Ithaca, New York: Unpublished manuscript, Department of Education, Cornell University, 1986).
4. Scott Willard, "Sharing to Learn, Learning to Share: Corwith-Wesley and Luverne Common Schools." ERIC ED 221317, 1982.
5. Gene L. Schmidt. "Facilitating Inter-District Cooperation," (Ithaca, New York: Paper commissioned for the 1983 Rural Schools Programs Annual Conference, Department of Education, Cornell University, January, 1984).
6. Galvin, "Sharing Among Separately Organized School Districts."
7. There was one notable exception to this pattern. One of the responding districts described an extensive sharing program that involved courses as

well as athletic teams. We followed up on this response by conducting a mini-case study in this district. The results of this case study are summarized later. A more detailed analysis appears in Galvin, "Sharing Among Separately Organized School Districts."

8. The business administration literature is more analytical than the educational administration literature and provides a number of ways to think about the problems that arise when organizations attempt to share.
9. David Jacobs, "Dependence and Vulnerability: An Exchange Approach to the Control of Organization," *Administrative Science Quarterly*, 19 (1974), pp. 45-59.
10. See Gary Canter, "The Promise of Educational Technology for Small Rural Schools," (Ithaca, New York: Unpublished manuscript, Department of Education, Cornell University, 1986), for a review of this research.
11. See Henry M. Levin and Gail R. Meister, "Educational Technology and Computers: Promises, Promises, Always Promises," (Stanford, California: Institute for Research on Educational Finance and Governance, School of Education, Stanford University, November 1985), for a similar conclusion, although they do not deal with the teacher substitution issue
12. Dean Jamison, Steven Klees, and Stuart Wells, *The Costs of Educational Media*, (Beverly Hills, California: Sage, 1978)
13. In fact, in this case there is an ongoing formative evaluation which is designed to make changes in the program as difficulties surface.

Chapter 6

Toward Balance: Recommended Changes in New York State Policy

People concerned with education in small rural schools agree that the status quo is unacceptable. The evidence we report regarding the lack of educational opportunities in the very smallest of New York State's school districts, the difficulties associated with recruiting and retaining high quality teachers, and the low educational aspirations of many students are consistent with the claim that a "business-as-usual" approach to rural education will not do.

Consensus does not exist, however, regarding the best course of action for the State to take. At one extreme are those who remain convinced that traditional district reorganization through centralization or annexation is the single best way to improve educational opportunities. An even more extreme version of this view holds that reorganization enhances the life of ccommunities in addition to the educational opportunities for students. At the opposite extreme are those who celebrate the virtues of the small rural school and view any attempt to engineer enrollment increases as anathema. Often, those with this latter perspective place great faith in interdistrict sharing, particularly sharing that includes long distance interactive telecommunications.

Our reading of the evidence prompts us to seek a middle ground. We have explored in some detail the traditional reorganization option and have found it lacking in important respects. Our focus on the defects of reorganization stands in stark contrast to the much more common glowing reports about its successes. Moreover, we find that many of the "successes" associated with reorganization (e.g., improvements in programs and facilities with little or no cost to taxpayers) stem in part from the additional state aid that accompanies school mergers rather than from reorganization itself.

At the same time, we recognize that reorganization is a means by which some deficiencies in the smallest school districts can be remedied. Thus, we find ourselves viewing district reorganization as a viable if flawed organizational alternative that deserves serious consideration. We are particularly impressed with what reorganization may offer districts with fewer than 400 pupils in grades 9-12. The fact that we recognize reorganization's advantages distinguishes our view sharply from its stauncher opponents.[1]

We have also studied alternatives to district reorganization, namely interdistrict sharing and innovative uses of educational technology. Again, we find serious flaws. Interdistrict sharing requires a delicate balance among competing interests that is extraordinarily difficult to achieve and maintain. And instructional technology, while it may offer considerable potential for the future, can alleviate only marginal and very specialized problems today.

Finally, our study of the problems in small rural schools reveals considerable variation from one district to the next. That variation makes a single, standard solution chimerical. Moreover, we find many of these problems are not at their heart either educational or organizational; they cannot be successfully addressed by organizational solutions. Indeed, some are rooted in

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successfully addressed by organizational solutions. Indeed, some are rooted in wide-scale social and demographic changes and will resist any conceivable action by the State.

Thus, we are dealing with school districts that face unique combinations of serious problems and a number of different organizational solutions, each of which is seriously flawed. We also find considerable evidence that New York State has acted as if there is a single best solution for these problems, namely the reorganization of school districts into larger units.

In light of all this, we recommend three broad, interrelated changes in State policy: (a) The State should make it possible for school districts to give unbiased consideration to traditional reorganization; (b) it should provide additional alternatives to reorganization; and (c) it should be more tolerant of and accept greater financial responsibility for the cost of expanding educational opportunities in small rural schools.

In regard to the first of these, we think that the traditional reorganization option is not so superior to the others that it warrants the preferred status currently accorded to it by the State. By placing the competition among organizational alternatives on a more even footing, the State will enhance the ability of local school districts to organize themselves in a way best suited to local needs.

In regard to the second, it is clear that when a district considers reorganization as a strategy to address its problems, it really has relatively few options. Further, each of these options is an all-or-nothing proposition. Thus, small rural schools that consider reorganization have few alternatives for proceeding and must embrace one of these in its entirety. We think that it is important for New York to increase the options available. This will permit districts to better tailor their actions to local conditions.

Finally, our third general recommendation calls for greater tolerance from the State for the costs that accompany rural education. The State must recognize the flawed nature of the organizational alternatives available to the small rural schools and abandon the hope of transforming them into versions of the kinds of schools servicing suburban and urban populations. Indeed, as we saw in Chapter 3, it is quite unclear that such a transformation would even be desirable. Small rural schools have unique advantages for their students, and these advantages are worth preserving.

None of the organizational alternatives we studied is capable of eliminating the extra cost of providing education in small rural settings. The alternatives vary in terms of the magnitude of their additional cost and the precise way in which it is apportioned among students, local taxpayers, and the State. But the fact remains that the extra cost is present. If we take seriously the goal of expanding educational opportunities in small rural settings, these additional cost must be borne. This is an instance of the classic tradeoff that exists between enhancing equity and efficiency in an educational system. Additional equity comes at some expense, and the State should bear a larger share of these additional expenditures.

We have divided the remainder of this chapter into three sections corresponding to these three general recommendations. Within each we advance specific policy changes intended to implement the general recommendation.

THE STATE SHOULD MAKE IT POSSIBLE FOR SCHOOL DISTRICTS TO GIVE UNBIASED CONSIDERATION TO TRADITIONAL REORGANIZATION AS A SOLUTION TO THE PROBLEMS OF SMALL SIZE

We have two messages to deliver in this context. The first concerns existing impediments to traditional reorganization; the second concerns the use of financial incentives to encourage it.

Impediments

We found considerable dissatisfaction, even bitterness, about the current procedures governing district reorganization efforts. Dissatisfaction with procedures was not limited to any particular type of district we studied. We found it in the districts that considered reorganization and rejected it as well as in communities where it succeeded. This evidence leads us to the conclusion that current procedures are outdated and stand in the way of mergers that are desirable and acceptable at the local level. Thus, we argue that the State is in the anomalous position of inadvertently blocking reorganizations through the use of out-dated procedures. We recommend dealing directly with the source of the difficulty, namely the outdated procedures.

We recommend the following reforms.

1. Ballots should be counted separately in each community for all reorganization referenda. A majority of voters in each district should be required in order for the reorganization to be approved.

Perceptions that one community favored the reorganization while a second community was opposed can interfere seriously with the success of a newly formed school district. Success is most likely when communities going into the merger know that both (or all) support the change.

The current procedure, wherein centralization votes are pooled, may have made sense at one time. In previous years reorganizations frequently involved three, four, or even a larger number of separately organized school districts. The concern was that a single community, located in the middle of the region, could veto the reorganization and thereby thwart the will of what might be a vast majority of the voters in the area.

Today, such multiple-district mergers are rare. Moreover, the drawbacks of the pooling policy are substantial. Reorganizations are important events in communities; the fact that they are asked to engage in a process where they will never know how their own voters stand on the issue generates a reluctance even to consider the proposition.

The State's insistence that votes be pooled stands in the way of a rational debate on the proposition at the local level. It generates the justified suspicion that the mere willingness to consider the possibility can lead to a chain of events that determines the outcome. If communities knew that the consideration of reorganization was not tantamount to placing their fate in the hands of an entirely different voting aggregation, there would emerge a greater willingness to assess the proposition on its merits.

2. Procedures should be established that will make it possible for voters to know, prior to a reorganization referendum, who will govern the new district if the reorganization is approved, and what its structural characteristics will be (e.g., in what schools the various grades will be housed).

There are two parts to this recommendation. The first deals with governance, the second structure. Current procedures concerning both are flawed. By governance we refer to the formation of the initial school board for a newly reorganized district. Current law provides for the election of a new board after districts centralize. Voters at the time of the referendum are therefore ignorant of who will govern the organizational entity they have been asked to consider. This ignorance contributes to the uncertainty surrounding reorganization propositions and can lead to the defeat of referendums that might be acceptable to a majority of the affected parties.

The second part of the recommendation deals with structural issues such as which buildings will operate and how grades will be divided among facilities. Current regulations regarding centralization prevent voters from obtaining answers to basic questions about the operation of the district they are being asked to form. These questions can only be definitively answered by the board that has legal authority over the district. In the case of centralization, that board is not elected until after the reorganization referendum is approved. Thus, voters are asked to support something whose properties cannot be clearly specified. Judging from the rancorous comments made to us about current procedure, the inability of voters to obtain answers to reasonable questions counts as one of the most important impediments to securing approval of centralization referendums.

Concerning the first of these matters, governance, we recommend a different approach wherein voters know who will serve on the board of the reorganized district at the time they vote on the referendum. We believe this could best be accomplished by separating the governance decision from the reorganization decision and by making the former before, rather than after, the latter. The new approach calls upon voters to decide first whether they wish to form a "Planning and Transition Board" of a certain size to (a) develop a reorganization plan and (b) serve as the initial school board of the reorganized district in the event that voters approve the referendum. The decision to form such a board should be made by majority vote in each of the involved communities. If the referendum to form the Planning and Transition Board succeeds in all of the districts, the next step is to hold at-large elections for membership on the board.

The at-large elections will determine how representation on the board will be apportioned among the participating communities. Thus, the sensitive apportionment decision will be made democratically, and this is superior to the various formulaic approaches that have been proposed.[2] If an unacceptable division occurs, the dissatisfied community will at least know this prior to the reorganization vote.

Concerning structure, the Planning and Transition Board, once it is formed, would be responsible for preparing and presenting to the voters a detailed description of how the new district will be structured. Since this is the board that will have legal authority over the district if the reorganization is approved, there is no sense in which the options of a future board are being restricted. In other words, assuming the reorganization is approved, the Planning and Transition Board will retain the right to change its mind about some matters. There is, therefore, no guarantee to the voters that every aspect of the plan developed by the board will be enacted.

One advantage we see in this proposal is that no longer will voters be left speculating about what a new board will do. They will know the identity of the board, and they will know what that board thinks regarding the structural features of the proposed school district. For example, the voters will know what the board thinks should be done with the various buildings and how the grades would best be distributed across facilities. The level of detail provided to the voters will be decided at the local level by the members of the Planning and Transition Board.

Once the Planning and Transition Board formulates its plans for the new district, a reorganization referendum will be placed before the voters. This referendum will not be different from what is currently voted upon except for the fact that (a) membership of the initial board for the proposed district will be specified and (b) a nonbinding plan developed by the responsible board will be available. If the reorganization is approved (by majority vote in each of the component districts), the board that developed the plan will assume legal responsibility for the newly formed district. If the referendum fails, the board that developed the plan will be dissolved and the component districts will retain their separate identities. Notice that this procedure also permits the existing boards to separate themselves somewhat from what may be a very divisive event; they are not required to advocate the reorganization. To the extent that advocacy is necessary, that would properly fall to the Planning and Transition Board.

Terms of office for members of this board should be staggered to permit a smooth transition over time. Elections to the board in subsequent years would be handled on an at-large basis in the normal fashion. The net result is that the transition-planning board will evolve into a regular school board within a short time.

One of the arguments we have heard in opposition to this recommendation is that at the time of the referendum it is very difficult to tell what the best structure for the new district will be. We find this argument entirely specious and symptomatic of the kind of dilemma voters face when they are asked to vote on reorganization. It is unreasonable to ask voters to approve something closely touching their children's lives without specifying its nature. What is to prevent the involved districts from working out the details before the vote? The only answer that has the slightest merit is that boards are reluctant to invest the substantial time necessary to spell out the details until they know that the planning effort will actually bear fruit. Such reluctance is born of cynicism that is regrettable in light of the magnitude of the change voters are being asked to consider. Is it too much to ask that the details be made available to the voters before they are asked to consider substantially reforming an important community institution? Nothing structural prevents boards from developing detailed proposals for the merger. If cost is the stumbling block, the State should play a role in financing the required planning. State funding for research done prior to reorganizations is provided for elsewhere in our recommendations.[3]

3. A procedure should be established that would permit a reorganizing district to avoid incurring the debts or deferred maintenance costs of its partner.

A reorganization proposition can be defeated because of voters' unwillingness to assume additional costs stemming from debt or deferred maintenance in neighboring districts. A district that has incurred heavy debts, or one that has neglected its physical plant, is not an attractive partner for a reorganization. When an otherwise meritorious consolidation is rejected for these reasons, students in both districts are penalized for the behavior of a school board in one of them. We have evidence that mergers have been rejected, at least in part, for this quite understandable reason. We recommend that the State develop a procedure that would remove this obstacle to reorganization.

One approach to this deterrent would be to establish a state fund to absorb the differences between uneven levels of debt and deferred maintenance in districts that agree to reorganize. For example, at the time of a merger, estimates of the costs of deferred maintenance in both districts could be obtained, and the difference in these costs could be paid to the newly reorganized district. Thus, merging school systems would bring equal levels of indebtedness to a consolidation, and the current impediment would be removed.

Obviously this approach has a significant drawback. Were it to be adopted, the State would be providing an incentive to individual districts to incur large debts or neglect their physical plant, because these costs could possibly be imposed on other taxpayers at some future date. We think such actions are implausible. In any case, this procedure seems more fair than current practices which, when they stymie desirable reorganizations, essentially require students to bear the costs in the form of inadequate programs.

Alternatively, it should be possible for laws to be crafted that would require differences in debt or deferred maintenance costs to be levied as a surcharge on the school taxes of residents of the responsible district after a reorganization has taken place. It is our understanding that state law once permitted this procedure insofar as debts were concerned. We recommend this alternative, since it does not shift the burden of debt to taxpayers across the State or to the partner in the merger.

4. Steps should be taken to make districts' wealth of irrelevant to their voters' reorganization decisions.

Reorganizations that involve two or more districts of significantly different wealth levels pose special challenges. Even in cases where benefits would be realized in the form of increased efficiency and enhanced programs, the wealthier district may be understandably reluctant to participate in the reorganization. This reluctance stems from the possibility that reorganization would lead to increased tax rates in the wealthier district.

When a relatively wealthy district agrees to reorganize several things happen. First, the tax bases of the involved districts are combined. For the relatively wealthy district this will lead to a reduction in the tax base on a per-pupil basis. If all else were held constant this reduction in the tax base would lead to an increase in the tax rate. But, all else is not held constant. In particular, the wealthy district will receive more state operating aid per pupil than it has in the past; it will receive reorganization incentive aid (although we propose significant changes in this aid below); and it will benefit from whatever gains in efficiency are obtained thanks to the gain in size. These factors will work to offset the increase in tax rate that is occasioned by the loss of the tax base. The key question is whether the offsetting factors are sufficiently strong to swamp the effect of the tax base loss.

In many cases these offsetting influences (the additional state aid, the incentive aid, and the efficiency gains) will more than balance the effect of the tax base loss. But this need not be the case. It is possible for the wealthier of the two districts in a reorganization to find itself paying higher taxes as a consequence of a merger. The likelihood of this will be enhanced if the State accepts the recommendations we make below about incentive aid. Moreover, even if the wealthier district's tax rate does not rise in absolute terms, it will decrease by less than that of a poorer district. Thus, wealthy communities have less financial incentive to join poor communities than poor communities have to join wealthy ones.

Unevenness of benefit due to unevenness of wealth is an impediment to reorganization that can be remedied by the State. Steps need to be taken to make reorganizations with relatively poor districts more attractive. Currently, the State's policy does precisely the opposite. Greater financial incentives are offered to poor districts to reorganize. The goal of the change we propose is not to enhance the offerings in the small wealthy systems of the State. Many already offer admirable programs. Rather the goal is to facilitate the sharing of a large tax base with neighboring small and poorer districts. The benefits of expanding the tax base in this fashion are considerable.[4] Although the joining of districts with large differences in wealth will never be easily accomplished, we believe it is desirable to remove as many impediments to this kind of reorganization as possible.

This is one specific example of a more general phenomenon we found in our case studies. The gains from reorganization tend to be unevenly distributed across the districts involved. We saw this in one case study where perceptions of unevenness were an important reason for the ultimate defeat of the reorganization.[5] We also saw this in a second case study where the unevenness was not sufficient to block the reorganization, but it became an important part of the post-reorganization political climate.[6]

We turn next to our recommendations regarding financial incentives designed to encourage the use of the traditional reorganization.

Incentives

A significant erosion of local autonomy has occurred in the context of school district organization decisions. The State maintains an official neutrality and asserts that reorganization is a decision that is best made locally. However, the State also provides financial incentives for districts that are willing to reorganize in ways the State considers beneficial. As we have shown in Chapter 4, these incentives are substantial and have increased over time.[7] Currently there is discussion of increasing them yet again. It is one thing to provide an incentive, it is quite another to make a district an offer that in good conscience it cannot refuse. As we have seen, under current practice small districts may gain several million dollars in additional aid over the first few years following a reorganization.

The magnitude of these financial incentives to district reorganization has had the effect of placing relatively poor districts under considerably more pressure to reorganize than relatively wealthy ones. This difference in pressure may be largely independent of the relative merits of their respective reorganizations. Further, as we have shown in Chapter 4, students experience significant advantages from attending small schools. It is unclear to us why students in small poor districts should be placed in greater jeopardy of losing these benefits than their peers in small wealthy ones.

Our claim is that traditional reorganization becomes a more viable locally selected option to the extent that the State plays a less proactive role. Recurring evidence in our case studies supports this claim. In those instances where the traditional reorganization was approved, we were told that the reason had less to do with financial incentives than with the conviction that in the long run better programs would be delivered more efficiently. In one instance where the reorganization was declined, we were told that the encouragement from the State actually contributed to the defeat.[8] The incentive aid in this case was not sufficient to persuade voters of the merits of the reorganization.

Moreover, by tying what can be a substantial influx of monies to the reorganization decision, the State has made it impossible to separate the effects of reorganization from the effects of the additional aid that accompanies it. The State claims that in reorganized districts programs and facilities are improved and tax rates lowered. But it is impossible to know this. Are these consequences of the reorganization itself or of the additional operating and building aid the State has paid to districts willing to reorganize? Suppose comparable sums were paid to small districts that did not reorganize? Surely their programs and facilities would improve, and their tax burdens might go down as well. It is wrong to look at the record of program and facility improvements in reorganized districts and assume uncritically that these are the benefits of reorganization per se.

We make four recommendations regarding financial incentives.

> 5. The financial incentives provided for district reorganization should be eliminated. These should be replaced by a program of transition aid based on the actual costs of effecting a given reorganization.

A compelling argument can be made in opposition to any kind of long-term reorganization incentive aid. If the gains in quality and efficiency associated with combining districts are real (such gains are, after all, the fundamental rationale for reorganizations), they ought to provide sufficient incentive in themselves for districts to reorganize. Under this argument, all the State needs to provide are the mechanisms for accomplishing a reorganization and reimbursement of the actual costs of carrying one out. Anything beyond this amounts to double-dipping on the part of small school districts and is difficult to defend.[9]

Further, and on an empirical level, our research results (and those of others) are clear: With the possible exception of very small districts operating high schools with enrollments below 400 students, there are no dependable gains in program quality or efficiency to be had from merging together small rural school districts. Still further, our research results (and those of others) also are clear regarding certain benefits that accrue to students from attending small schools.[10] This is particularly the case in the matter of opportunities to achieve recognition and exercise leadership in non-academic settings. Finally, it is clear that whether or not a given reorganization produces gains in equity and efficiency is heavily dependent on a number of local conditions, not the least of which is the quality of the vision and leadership exercised by the school superintendent. It follows from all this, therefore, that there is no compelling State interest served by routinely and substantially rewarding small school districts for merging. Such rewards amount to unjustified transfers of monies from other—sometimes poorer—school districts in New York.

Shortly we will suggest several alternatives to traditional school reorganization, and we will suggest ways that the State could facilitate their use. In each of these the State has a financial involvement, but it is quite modest. This modest involvement has to be squared with the State's current very substantial support of traditional reorganization. To achieve balance among these alternatives, and hence encourage districts to choose among them solely on the basis of their merit, New York should eliminate the incentives attached to traditional reorganization.

However, we recognize that transition costs accompany the reorganization of school districts and that these costs are properly borne by the State. For example, teachers and administrators and service personnel may be displaced because of a reorganization. Costs attend the placement of these employees. Moreover, the numerous changes in programs that can accompany a reorganization can lead to confusion and alarm on the part of taxpayers, parents, and students. Costs attend efforts to explain changes carefully to the involved parties. As time passes and the changes are accomplished, there is less need for such extensive public relations efforts.

A strong case can be made for additional state aid on the grounds that these transition costs constitute impediments to reorganization and interfere with reorganizations that citizens at the local level deem desirable. These additional funds could be used to help the affected communities adjust to what is often a traumatic change. It is critical to be able to respond to accusations and rumors during the reorganization period. Current practice provides for extensive debate and discussion up to the time of the referendum. Once the matter is decided, local officials are left on their own to negotiate the delicate change, often in a short time. If transition funds were available, the districts could obtain the technical assistance needed to effect a smooth transition into the new organizational structure.

Our case studies demonstrate clearly the uniqueness of each reorganization. For example, in one the vote was very close and a substantial portion of the electorate had serious misgivings about the reorganization that was accomplished.[11] In another, the vote was decisive and widespread agreement existed, at least in the short term.[12] The need for public relations work was likely greater in the former than the latter district. By making the new reorganization aid cost-based rather than determined by some arbitrary formula (based on something like the number of students or the wealth of the communities), it will be possible for the State to provide resources where they are needed to accomplish a smooth transition to the new organizational structure.

The mechanics of this transition aid might involve the Planning and Transition Boards recommended earlier. As part of the reorganization planning process carried out by the Planning and Transition Board (see recommendation 2) a formal transition plan would be developed. The period of transition would be specified and the cost of the transition would be estimated. The State would then review the plan and would provide funding in full for all approved elements in the plan. Guidelines specifying what would count as approved elements in a transition plan would have to be developed by the State.

6. The 1958 Master Plan (revised) should cease to serve as a basis for providing or not providing regular building aid to districts.

This use of the 1958 Master Plan must count as one of the less obvious but at times highly significant incentives for districts to reorganize. It applies only to the poorer of the small districts, since the wealthy districts can and have proceeded with building plans that run counter to its provisions. The wealthy districts have simply been willing to fund projects themselves. It is worth noting that even if the wealthy districts had been eligible for the building aid, the amount they would have received was small. This is because building aid, quite properly, is wealth equalized.

Poorer districts have been more dependent on the State for building aid and have therefore experienced more pressure than wealthy districts to come into compliance with the *Master Plan*. The problem for poorer districts is only compounded when the partner they are encouraged to join is a wealthy district for whom the advantages of reorganization are difficult to discern.

One of the consequences of the State's unwillingness to provide building aid to out-of-compliance districts has been a degree of facility deterioration and obsolescence in small schools. Several of our case studies involved districts with serious facility problems that stemmed from the denial of building aid. We suspect that building facility problems are more widespread among small rural schools than among suburban or urban schools in the State. This constitutes an important area for future research.

The State has been increasingly sensitive to building problems in small schools in recent years and has been willing on occasion to authorize regular building aid for a small district that is out of compliance with the Master Plan. Indeed, in one of our case studies, the State Education Department has gone so far as to not oppose a legislative initiative to grant a small out-of-compliance district more building aid than is provided for by the regular formula.[13] The State Education Department's motives are understandable in this instance. The district involved has a very serious facility problem and after many years and numerous studies of reorganization possibilities, little progress toward a solution has been made. The State's acquiesence appears to grow more from frustration with the district than from anything else.

We are concerned with the ad hoc nature of such special treatment. We recommend that the State develop a single building aid formula based on accurate measures of fiscal capabilities and need for facilities. If a district can demonstrate a need for facilities, and if taxpayers are willing to shoulder their fair share of the financial burden, the State should not second-guess local voters using the status of the district in the Master Plan as a criterion.

7. School boards should be helped to make better judgments concerning the qualifications of the consultants they hire to carry out feasibility and efficiency grant studies and to evaluate the worth of the completed research.

The hallmark of high quality feasibility and efficiency studies is a clear statement of the problems districts are seeking to solve and the advantages and disadvantages of a range of available options. Against this standard, there is good reason to be concerned about the quality of the studies that local districts commission. As we noted in Chapter 4, the feasibility studies we examined were uniformly deficient in their failure to seriously examine the pros and cons of a particular reorganization, and in their writers' seeming ignorance of their own profession's research on the topic. The efficiency grant program is new and has considerable promise. It provides up to $20,000 to cooperating districts to study reorganization or sharing possibilities. Thus, it is likely to take the place of the former feasibility projects. In fact, if the recommendations we make below regarding partial reorganizations are adopted, there will be a whole range of new options for districts to investigate using these grants.

We have not examined the products of the efficiency grant program, but there are considerable grounds for concern regarding these studies as well. For example, guidelines for these grants do not require an investigator to examine the merits and demerits of an alternative.[14] More significantly, it appears that the same group of consultants is likely to be involved in this new program as was involved in carrying out the feasibility studies. As Davis' research shows, these persons are convinced of the desirability of the traditional reorganization options. They vary only in terms of how proactive they believe the State ought to be in forcing districts to reorganize.[15]

Our concern is to insure that school boards receive the best information possible before they make critically important reorganization decisions or enter into agreements with other districts to share services. Such information can come from careful, methodologically sound, unbiased studies of the advantages and disadvantages of whatever options are under consideration, coupled with a review of the relevant and current research. As laypersons, many without extensive formal educations, board members may be ill-equipped to assess a consultant's competence or a report's adequacy.

We are unsure how the State might help to insure that board members become knowledgeable regarding these matters. We are very sure, however, that such knowledge is essential if boards are to adequately discharge their responsibilities. A consultant's competence is not assured merely because he or she has administered a school district for many years. Nor is a report adequate merely because it follows a standard format. Perhaps this is an area in which the New York State School Boards Association could help by designing and implementing a training program for school boards.

This completes our discussion of the State's proper role in facilitating the unbiased consideration of traditional reorganization. We turn next to a discussion of how the State can facilitate the use of alternatives to traditional reorganization.

THE STATE SHOULD PROVIDE ADDITIONAL ORGANIZATIONAL ALTERNATIVES TO SMALL RURAL SCHOOLS

Recall our emphasis on the need for alternatives to traditional reorganization. In this section we explore two fundamentally different alternatives and spell out the steps that need to be taken to make these alternatives more viable. The first involves providing for the partial reorganization of school districts; the second provides for what we call "institutionalized sharing" among separately organized districts.

Partial Reorganization

New York State has tended to view school district reorganization as an all-or-nothing proposition. Either the reorganization referendum is approved or it is not. Moreover, if it is approved, there is no returning to the original organizational structure. Our findings indicate that gains in enrollment, particularly gains up to the 400 pupil level in grades 9-12, are likely to lead to dependable benefits for taxpayers and students alike. Our findings also indicate that there are drawbacks to traditional reorganization and that there is some truth to the claim that in New York the "obvious" traditional reorganizations have all taken place.

In light of this, we began to seek a middle ground wherein at least some benefits of increasing enrollment levels could be achieved without sacrificing benefits that attend the separate organization of small, community-based school districts. We believe this middle ground can be achieved and that it is a viable and attractive alternative for many of the remaining small school districts in the State. Thus:

8. Procedures should be implemented that would permit the partial reorganization of school districts.

The State can facilitate the partial reorganization of school districts in two basic ways. The first and more conventional approach involves having the State specify each of the possible ways in which a partial reorganization could be accomplished. Local districts would then choose the structure and procedures best suited to local conditions. We say this is the more conventional approach because it builds logically on existing State policy. Currently, districts can reorganize in several different ways. Depending on the circumstances they can either centralize, annex, or consolidate. At times, a district can choose one or the other. The point is that there currently exists a series of organizational options, each of which differs in how it is accomplished and how the resulting district is structured. It would be possible to add to this list so that it included partial reorganization options. Four of these options are discussed here: the central (or regional) high school, the cluster district, the internally differentiated district, and the student-tuition exchange. We close this section with a discussion of a less conventional approach to partial reorganization, locally designed reorganizations.

Central (or regional) high school districts arise when districts combine their high school programs and vest governance authority in a new high school board but retain separate authority over elementary programs that feed into the high school. This is a common organizational structure outside of New York State, most notably in Illinois. As of 1986 there were only three central high school districts in New York State.

The central high school concept has been under attack. The chief complaint is that it generates curriculum articulation problems between the separately organized elementary districts and the receiving high school district. Problems also arise when elementary districts seek to leave a high school district and try to shop among available high schools.

Despite these flaws, some good things can also be said about the central high school concept. It can facilitate the reorganization of districts that otherwise would never reorganize. It is directed toward that level of schooling, the secondary, where small size is most problematic. Local communities are able to control that part of their children's education that is perhaps of greatest concern, the elementary years. The children being bused furthest under this arrangement will be older rather than younger students. And it begins to foster discussion among communities and thereby breaks down the parochialism that is characteristic of separately organized school districts.

We find it instructive that criticisms about central high schools seem to emanate from suburban rather than rural applications. In Illinois, the regional high schools are more common in the northern suburban Chicago area of the State; in New York State, all three of the central high school districts are on Long Island. There is reason to believe that the concept has more merit in rural areas, where there are fewer options for shopping among high schools, where values and social characteristics are more likely to be similar across communities, and where people may view the reorganized high school as a means of maintaining their own elementary programs.

We suspect that this organizational alternative has merit in certain areas of New York State, and we recommend that the central high school option be made available.

The basic idea of *the cluster district* is that separately organized schooling units share in the provision of specified services.[16] These services are usually administrative, although this need not be the case. For example, a single superintendent might work with several different boards and divide his or her time among the participating districts.

The concept also applies to instances where districts agree to share specific programs. In this context, the idea becomes very similar to what New York State currently provides under the BOCES structure and to what we propose below under the "institutionalized sharing" rubric.

To our knowledge, *the internally differentiated district* is a new organizational form. What we have in mind is a structure wherein a single board governs a school district subject to certain restrictions. These restrictions might include a requirement that the district maintain separate elementary schools in each of several communities, or that the district maintain two separate high school programs, or that the district not close a given building.

The result could be in many ways similar to the central high school district we describe above but different in that a single board maintains responsibility over the entire district. By having a single board and a single central administration, the curriculum articulation problems that sometimes occur in central high school districts can, in principle, be made less severe.

We can anticipate criticisms of this structure. For example, the restrictions could interfere with the efficiency of the district. Why, one might ask, should a board be forced to operate an old, inefficient school for a handful of children just because years ago the voters imposed an obligation to maintain the building? The proposal also raises constitutional questions about whether boards can yield authority on matters such as whether to maintain a building.

The concern about efficiency is valid. But we urge the reader to keep the larger picture in mind. It is conceivable that the agreement to maintain a given elementary building was required to secure approval of the reorganization. If so, the inefficiency stemming from operating the small elementary school needs to be compared with the gain in efficiency stemming from the reorganization of the district.

The concern about the constitutionality of this proposal is also valid. It is beyond the scope of this research to examine the legal ramifications of a given set of reforms. It is, however, worth noting that there is precedent for placing restrictions on school boards' options. For example, boards do not have authority to break their districts into separate units. Nor do boards have the option of violating State fire codes, safety regulations, and the like. Further research into the constitutionality of the "internally differentiated" school district is needed.

It is not uncommon for small New York State districts to *exchange students for tuition* with neighboring districts. Indeed, the same practice also occurs across state lines. The State facilitates this practice by tying the tuition a receiving district charges to the difference between its costs and the increased level of State aid the higher enrollment generates.

This is an attractive alternative for many small districts. They avoid the cost of operating their own high schools, and, depending on the wealth of their neighboring communities, the tuition cost can be relatively modest.

The chief drawback is that the sending district loses virtually all formal influence over the high school program offered to its youngsters. The only influence the sending district has is the value of its threat to withdraw its students from the receiving school. When only a few students are involved, this threat has little impact. The situation is different when tuition students constitute a large portion of the receiving district's high school clientele.

A second drawback is related to the first and involves the disruption occasioned by the withdrawal of students from a receiving district. When sending districts "shop" frequently for a high school program, receiving districts can be placed at a substantial disadvantage.

These problems could be solved if it became possible for the sending district to have official representation on the board of the receiving district. This would give the sending district some say in the affairs of the district receiving its secondary students and would likely stimulate an increased use of the tuitioning option. Formal representation could also contribute to the stability of the partnerships formed.

The disadvantage we can anticipate is related to deciding precisely how the representation will be accomplished. Should it be based on the proportion of students in the receiving district who come from each sending district? Should these "outside" board members participate in all of the receiving district's affairs, including those that deal only with the elementary program? If not, how would one distinguish among matters affecting the elementary program only and all others? We cannot resolve these difficulties here. Our purpose is to raise them for the sake of stimulating debate.

One final point about the tuition alternative. If the representation were to be proportional, the State could find itself moving toward what would amount to a variation on the central high school concept. There would be one board with representatives from sending districts that made policy for the secondary program that serviced two or more districts.

We have stated that there are two basic ways in which the State can facilitate the partial reorganization of school districts. We have just completed our discussion of the first approach, the delineation of specific options among which local districts could choose. The second approach relies more heavily on persons at the local level to develop the type of reorganization that is best suited to local conditions. It relieves the State of having to make judgments about what options to provide districts and places responsibility for devising an organizational alternative squarely on the shoulders of local units. In our judgment, this is precisely where this responsibility is best placed.

The second approach, *locally designed reorganizations*, builds on our earlier proposal for the formation of Planning and Transition Boards. This proposal had to do with the nature of the referenda that the Planning and Transition Boards place before the voters. Our earlier proposal envisioned a referendum essentially unchanged from current practice. Voters would be asked to approve or disapprove the reorganization of specified districts. Readers will recall that this referendum was accompanied by a nonbinding plan developed by the body that would be responsible for the new district if the referendum was approved.

The alternative we propose here builds on the nature of the plan developed by the Planning and Transition Board. We suggest that it be possible for this board to develop a plan that would bind its future actions in certain ways for particular periods of time. The board might then offer voters a referendum that specified the structural characteristics of the district to be formed. For example, the board might propose to keep certain elementary schools open for at least a given period of time. If such a referendum were approved, the board would not have the option of reneging on the agreement without a subsequent referendum on the matter.

An advantage of this approach is the high degree of flexibility it provides for local boards to devise organizational structures that meet local needs. All of the alternatives we list above—as well as others we have as yet failed to identify—could be adopted under this procedure. This is important because, as we have shown, the problems in small rural schools are highly varied and do not lend themselves to single (or even multiple) standardized solutions.

A disadvantage of this approach is the constitutional issue it raises. Under what circumstances is it possible for voters to bind subsequent actions of elected representatives? As we indicated above, obtaining an answer to this question takes us substantially beyond the scope of the present research effort. There is, of course, precedent for voters placing restraints on elected representatives. Indeed, that is what constitutions accomplish. The constitutionality of voter-imposed restraints in this area of school district governance is an important area for future research.

Institutionalized Sharing

In light of our findings regarding sharing both within and outside of the BOCES organizational structure, we recommend establishing a program of what we call "institutionalized sharing." This type of sharing is a logical outgrowth of the cooperative arrangements within the BOCES system. It represents a significant improvement over the current system wherein sharing outside of BOCES among contiguous districts is done on a voluntary and ad hoc basis. Specifically:

9. Opportunities should be broadened for institutionalized sharing among neighboring school districts.

This proposal has two parts. First, it involves formalizing the relationship among two or more participating boards regarding the offering of shared services. Explicit contracts would be required and the contracts would run for specified periods. This provision makes cooperation less dependent upon personalities of individual administrators who may or may not remain in their positions.

Second, the State would, for the first time, contribute to the cost of operating the shared program. The rationale for involving the State in financing shared programs is precisely the same as that for involving the State in financing BOCES services. Indeed, we recommend that the magnitude of the State's contribution should be such that whether the program is offered within or outside of the BOCES structure would make no difference in terms of the aid received.

These contracts may or may not involve the actual exchange of programs. One possibility might be for one school district to offer, say, a high school mathematics program while a neighboring district might offer a science program. This amounts to a barter contract. The State's financial involvement would involve covering a portion of the cost associated with providing these services. The State's contribution would be divided among participating districts, which would retain discretion over how to utilize funds.

A second possibility would be a fee-for-service contract. For example, a district might enter an arrangement wherein it agreed to send its 11th- and 12th-grade students to a neighboring district for their junior- and senior-year programs. In exchange, the sending districts would pay a fee to the receiving school. This kind of arrangement is provided for under current law. The change we propose in this case is that the State underwrite a larger portion of the tuition costs. Such a contract should be written for a minimum number of years to avoid unforeseen changes in enrollments.

Should this option become popular, the State could find itself facilitating the creation of what comes close to being a central high school district. It is conceivable that a group of separately organized school districts would choose to send their high school students to a single regional facility on a tuition basis. There may be regions within New York State where this alternative has much to recommend it. The advantage of this reform is that it makes possible, but does not require, the formation of a regional approach to providing secondary education.

We believe that the availability of State-aided institutionalized sharing would stimulate an increased level of instructional cooperation among New York State school districts. Our goal is to build upon the successes of the BOCES structure.

10. Increased support should be provided for development and demonstration projects involving interactive telecommunications.

There are good reasons to believe that institutionalized sharing will involve extensive use of interactive telecommunications technology. Recall our findings that interactive telecommunications provide a way, albeit an expensive way, to overcome many of the size-related problems of small schools. Also recall our finding that coordination problems abound when separately organized school districts seek to cooperate in the simultaneous offering of courses on a long- distance network.

Telecommunication technology is at an early phase of development but shows considerable promise as a means of overcoming the problems of small isolated schools. By providing expanded support for development and demonstration projects involving these innovative technologies, the State could contribute in important ways to the further refinement of this important alternative for small rural school districts.

Our final set of recommendations deals with problems faced by small rural schools that transcend organizational solutions. It is here that we call upon the State to become more tolerant of the additional cost associated with expanding educational opportunities in small rural school districts.

THE STATE SHOULD BE MORE TOLERANT OF AND ACCEPT GREATER FINANCIAL RESPONSIBILITY FOR THE COST OF EXPANDING EDUCATIONAL OPPORUNITIES IN SMALL RURAL SCHOOLS

The problems of small rural school districts can transcend organizational solutions in several different ways. First, there are districts where for a variety of reasons reorganization is not a viable option. By removing the impediments to reorganization that we discussed above, the State can reduce the number of these districts. But even if all impediments were removed, there will remain a group of districts where reorganization, even partial reorganization, remains impossible. In many of these cases the unwillingness to reorganize will arise because of the districts' geography. In others, the unwillingness may stem from past traumatic attempts at reorganization. In still others, the reluctance may stem from the belief that the school must be maintained to preserve the identity of the community. The State must face the fact that some of the smallest districts will not reorganize in the foreseeable future. The problems in these districts transcend whatever solution reorganization offers.

Second, the organizational alternatives we have discussed are flawed in important ways. Although these alternatives (if pushed far enough) might solve some problems of small-size, they do so by creating new problems that are distributed among students, teachers, parents, and taxpayers. Moreover, it is hardly obvious that the organizational alternatives are capable of solving all of the small size problems.[17] This is particularly likely in cases where gains in enrollment are partial (e.g., partial reorganizations or the sharing of some but not all instructional programs).

Third, there are problems that have no direct link to size. Some of these are related to the isolation that accompanies rural settings; others are more widespread among New York State schools regardless of how rural or how small they are. Examples of these problems include the difficulties districts have hiring and retaining high-quality, well-trained teachers. They also include the low aspiration levels that we found in our case studies. Neither reorganization nor any of its alternatives is likely to do much to reduce the severity of these problems.

The time has come for the State to recognize that organizational solutions alone are insufficient to address the problems of small rural schools. We believe this because: (1) The State Board of Regents has developed an Action Plan that describes in considerable detail the minimal level of program that must be available to every student in New York State; (2) The problems we have identified in small rural schools interfere with the ability of these districts to offer the minimum program required by the Regents; (3) These problems do not stem from the incompetence or lack of resolve on the part of the actors in small rural schools—rather they are the inevitable by-product of operating small schools in rural settings; (4) Organizational alternatives are not capable of solving all of the problems we have identified.

We further believe that the State would be well advised to bear a larger share of the cost of providing programs in the remaining small schools in New York State. Additional dollars can help to alleviate some if not all of the problems facing the small schools in the State. We recommend two ways in which additional State dollars should be provided to small rural schools. First:

11. A program of "necessity aid" should be established for small rural districts.

Necessity aid should be a wealth-equalized program of general aid based solely on district enrollment levels. We recommend that this aid be provided to districts with 400 or fewer pupils enrolled in grades 9-12 and that its magnitude be inversely related to the number of pupils enrolled in these grades. Notice that wealthy small districts would not qualify for aid under these provisions. We use the term "necessity" to state clearly that the aid is designed to offset the unavoidable costs associated with operating small school districts.

The longstanding objection to providing additional operating aid to small school districts is that such aid would interfere with reorganization efforts. This concern prompted us to explore ways in which a distinction could be drawn between "necessarily" small school districts and small school districts that are small "out of choice." We have concluded that there is no way to achieve such a distinction. Moreover, in light of our arguments about the flawed nature of the existing organizational alternatives, we wonder whether this distinction is important. Even the reorganized districts that remain small face problems that reorganization is not capable of addressing. Either they are still small in an absolute sense or there are size-related difficulties that are not addressed by reorganization.

Moreover, even if we grant the point that some of the small districts remain small unnecessarily and for illegitimate reasons, the State's refusal to provide extra aid on the basis of small size works to the disadvantage of students rather than to the disadvantage of unreasonable voters who refuse to bend to the State's desire to foster reorganization.

It is no longer reasonable to punish districts for refusing to reorganize by denying them even partial relief from the extra cost small scale creates. As part of a new and more tolerant view of the extra cost that is unavoidable in small schools, we recommend that the State establish a "necessity aid" provision in its operating-aid formula.

Although it is true that each small rural school we studied faces a unique constellation of problems, nevertheless certain problems appeared repeatedly. We suspect that many of these problems could be found in districts throughout the State regardless of size. These problems are best addressed categorically and to that end we make our final recommendation:

12. The State should expand its program of categorical aids to address problems that are common in, but not unique to, small rural districts.

We have five suggestions to make regarding these categorical aids. Our suggestions are not intended to be exhaustive.

First, we suggest that aid be provided for teachers to become certified in additional areas of the curriculum. As we have noted, small rural schools are currently experiencing a teacher shortage in certain subject areas, as are their urban counterparts. However, the problem for rural schools is exacerbated by several factors, e.g., salary, isolation, etc. One of these is the fact that often a district does not require a full-time teacher in a particular subject. Retraining an existing staff person in a second certification area has several advantages. The recruitment difficulty is rendered moot. Districts would be able to select from among their best teachers the person to receive additional training. Teachers could be selected whose subject areas were in declining demand.

This aid should be paid directly to teachers employed by public school districts who enroll in State-accredited certification programs that meet the needs of the employing district. The amount paid to the teacher should be equal to a percentage of the tuition charged for the program. This should be set in the neighborhood of 80 percent. The reason for requiring some contribution from the teacher (or from some other source) is to avoid frivolous training. To further guard against frivolous training, teachers seeking State support should be required to obtain a statement from the employing school district certifying that the teacher's intended training will improve the district's ability to staff the courses it offers.

Second, programs should be established that encourage districts to exchange teachers and administrators for fixed periods. These should also encourage the travel of school board members to conferences and other districts.

We were repeatedly struck by the parochialism that characterized the small rural schools in our case studies. We also suspect, but cannot demonstrate, that this parochialism is not limited to the rural areas of the State. We recommend that the State facilitate exchanges among districts, preferably across regions within the State.

In this same context we were struck by the unwillingness of school boards in some of our smaller and poorer districts to participate in statewide and national activities. Anything the State could do to encourage board members to participate in state conferences and the like would, we suspect, pay handsome dividends.

Third, the State should strengthen its involvement in the development of instructional software and assign a higher priority to developing software that can substitute for hired human resources. Recall our finding that existing instructional software is incapable of substituting for teacher and other hired human instructional inputs. We argued that if computer-assisted instruction is to play any substantial role in increasing the efficiency of small as well as large schools, it is essential for that software to substitute for the costly human resources currently being employed.

We do not envision eliminating teachers from classrooms. We note, however, that small schools especially—and all schools to some degree—rely extensively on costly human resources to deliver instruction. Any progress toward the use of human resources embodied in the form of instructional software that maintains or even enhances student learning is highly desirable. We believe that instructional software can facilitate this progress and that the private market is not likely to provide the necessary incentives for developing this kind of software. It follows that State intervention is necessary.

This recommendation is consistent with, but goes further than, a recent recommendation made by the State Board of Regents.[18] In their recommendations, the Regents seek legislation that will provide incentives for the private sector to develop educationally relevant technology and services. The Regents do not distinguish as sharply as do we between technology that complements and that which substitutes for hired human resources. We believe this distinction is crucial, particularly for small schools. The Regents' reluctance to deal explicitly with this distinction will, we suspect, lead to an outpouring of products that complement existing human resources. In the final analysis, this type of technology will do little to increase the efficiency of any schools, be they small or large, rural or urban.

Fourth, aid should be provided that would increase the ability of school districts to offer courses outside of regular school hours and during the summer months. This recommendation stems from our findings about scheduling problems that face students who fail courses or who have interests that are in some sense unusual. Remedial courses could be offered on a regional basis on Saturdays or Sundays. Enrichment courses could be offered in a similar way.

Summer school constitutes a second and important way for students to overcome scheduling problems encountered as a consequence of their interests or failures in required courses. These problems are especially acute in small schools but our data indicate that scheduling problems exist in schools of all sizes.

Fifth, the State should make it possible for students in schools where aspiration levels are demonstrably low to become more knowledgable about broader ranges of career opportunities. Our case studies suggest widespread low levels of educational aspirations in New York State's small schools. These low aspiration levels manifested themselves in the form of a narrow range of postgraduation plans and a focus on the local community college among those planning to stay in school.

Our test score analyses indicated that students in small rural schools generally scored at levels comparable to their counterparts elsewhere. Given these results, one would expect these students' post-graduation plans to include the normal range of pursuits. The narrowness of the range that we repeatedly found is all the more disturbing in this light.

Students need to better realize the options available to them, both in terms of employment and higher education. This can be accomplished in two ways. First, aid could be provided to cover the costs of supervised student visits to distant colleges and universities. These funds should be administered by local school districts. Second, programs should be established to upgrade the training of teachers, administrators, and guidance counselors. The goal should be to make these persons more knowledgeable about a wider range of educational and career options available to their students.

FINAL COMMENTS

In this research we explored the folklore surrounding life in New York's small rural districts with the purpose of separating fact from fiction. We reached four principal conclusions: (a) Small rural districts are beset by numerous problems and simultaneously provide important advantages to their students and communities; (b) New York State has a long-standing policy of promoting school district reorganization as a means of solving those schools' problems; (c) District reorganization has very serious deficiencies; and (d) Alternatives to district reorganization are similarly flawed.

These conclusions led us to recommend three broad and inter- related changes in State policy. The changes were conceived under the explicit assumption that New York State would continue to exercise its proper role in setting and enforcing standards regarding program comprehensiveness and quality. With that understanding, we recommend: (a) The state should make it possible for school districts to give unbiased consideration to traditional reorganization as a solution to the problems of small size; (b) It should provide additional alternatives to traditional reorganizations; and (c) It should become more tolerant of and accept greater responsibility for the costs of expanding educational opportunities in small rural districts.

These three recommendations constitute the basis of a coherent and much-improved stance for the State regarding its small rural districts. They represent a fundamental change in State policy and are for that reason controversial.

We have tried to anticipate at least some of the objections to our recommendations, but there is undoubtedly more to say. Opportunities will arise for those with more to say to make their points. In controversial matters such as these, the more comprehensive the debate, the better conceived will be the final policy reforms.

We have now reached the end of the most comprehensive study of small rural districts in New York State during the last quarter century. Our conclusions and policy recommendations represent a sharp departure from past thinking about the State's small and rural districts. In contrast to the traditional emphasis on "bigger is better," we stress the importance of balance and flexibility. This new stance is in keeping with much of the current thinking about educational reform. The idea that there is a single optimal school or school district size is a myth that has played much mischief in this as well as other states. By debunking this myth and suggesting policy alternatives, we hope we have made a contribution to the educational opportunities offered to the rural children of New York.

Notes

1. Jonathan P. Sher, *Heavy Meddle: A Critique of the North Carolina Department of Public Instruction's Plan to Mandate School District Mergers Throughout the State*. Raleigh, NC: North Carolina's School Boards Association, April 1986.

2. One formulaic approach we considered but rejected called for the formation of a transition school board consisting of the members of the boards which existed prior to the merger. This is similar to what is done when BOCES are merged. The mandated formation of a transition board of this kind creates several serious difficulties. For example, because school boards contain an odd number of members the adding together of two boards would create a board with an even number of members. It would then be possible for tie votes to occur and the district could find itself unable to make decisions. This difficulty would only exist temporarily and would be remedied by the expiration of board members terms. However, this poses an additional difficulty because there may be unevenness in the expiration of terms so that one community could dominate the board during the transition period.

   An additional difficulty stems from the fact that boards vary in their size. If two boards of unequal size are merged, the larger of the two boards would dominate the merged board during the transition period. Moreover, districts being reorganized vary in their size. Questions can be asked about why an essentially arbitrary formula is used to apportion representation among what may be very different sized communities. Finally, not all reorganizations will involve only two school districts. How reasonable would it be to add together three or more boards?

3. See Recommendation 5.

4. Frederick L. Dembowski and Frances Kemmerer, "An Expanded Tax Base Approach to Wealth Neutrality." *Journal of Education Finance* 9(4), Spring 1984, pp. 474-483.

5. Patrick Galvin, "Community Participation and School District Reorganization," (Ithaca, New York: Unpublished manuscript, Department of Education, Cornell University, 1986).

6. Gary Canter, "School District Reorganization: A Qualified Success," (Ithaca, New York: Unpublished manuscript, Department of Education, Cornell University, 1986).

7. Charles E. Davis, "If We Can Haul the Milk, We Can Haul the Kids: A Personalized History of School District Reorganization in New York State," and Kate S. Woodward, "Legal and Organizational History of School District Reorganization in New York State," (Ithaca, New York: Unpublished manuscripts, Department of Education, Cornell University, 1986).

8. Galvin, "Community Participation."

9. As we pointed out in Chapter 5, much the same criticism can be (and is) made of BOCES aid. The savings from the sharing of programs ought to be sufficient in themselves to lead to cooperative efforts. BOCES aid allows districts to benefit from sharing twice: once from the savings inherent in the sharing and once from the additional aid the State provides to stimulate it.

10. See Bilow's review of the voluminous research on these topics. Scott Bilow, "The Size of School Districts: Economic and Psychological Perspectives," (Ithaca, New York: Unpublished manuscript, Department of Education, Cornell University, 1986).

11. See Kate S. Woodward, "Reorganization and Rancor: The Aftermath of a Troubled Reorganization," (Ithaca, New York: Unpublished manuscript, Department of Education, Cornell University, 1968).

12. Canter, "School District Reorganization."

13. See Jane Robertson, "A Small Rural Community's Poor Self Image and Its Impact on Educational Opportunities," (Ithaca, New York: Unpublished manuscript, Department of Education, Cornell University, 1986).

14. The language of the guidelines for these studies is permissive: "The efficiency study will be designed to determine the educational, financial and organizational advantages and/or disadvantages expected to result from reorganization or the sharing of programs, services and/or activities."

15. Davis, "If We Can Haul the Milk."

16. Several of the New England states make use of this concept, although they are more likely to use the term "union" to describe the nature of the organizational structure. We avoid the "union" term because of possible confusion in New York with the "union free" designation of existing school districts. "Cluster" is a better term for New York since it conveys the correct message and avoids the confusion. The "cluster" term is most closely associated with Paul Nachtigal and his work with western rural schools under the auspices of the Mid Continent Regional Laboratory.

17. Witness our finding that many of New York's larger high schools fail to offer the kinds of enrichment courses that are promised to small districts if they agree to reorganize.
18. See the document entitled, *Learning Technologies and Telecommunications in New York State: Action Recommendations*, New York State Education Department, Albany, New York, May 1985.

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